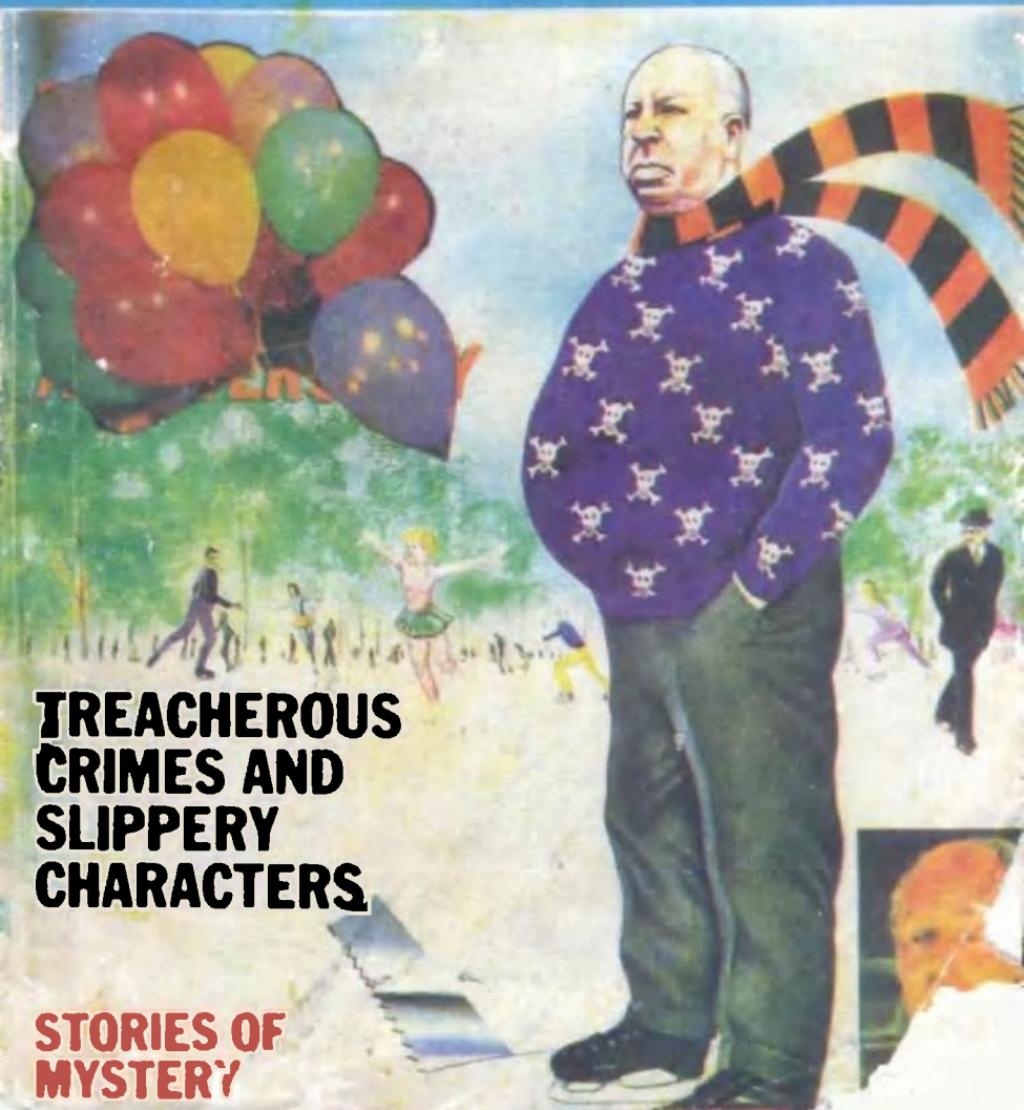


ALFRED
HITCHCOCK
MYSTERY STORIES



**TREACHEROUS
CRIMES AND
SLIPPERY
CHARACTERS**

**STORIES OF
MYSTERY**

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK Mystery Stories published monthly-12 times a year, November is Double Annual Festival Issue-Printed and Published by VIVEK CHOUDHRY for SEVEN SEAS PRINTERS & PUBLISHERS PVT. LTD., D-10/5, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-II, New Delhi-110020, India. Single Copy: Rs. 15.00 Annual Subscription: Rs. 180.00, Double Festival Issue: Rs 22.00. All Rights Reserved, protection under Universal Copyright Convention. All the stories in this issue are published by arrangement with DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NEW YORK, NY 10012, U.S.A. and their Agents SCOTT MEREDITH LITERARY AGENCY, INC., 845 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 11022, U.S.A. Subscriptions to be addressed and payable to SEVEN SEAS PRINTERS & PUBLISHERS PVT. LTD., D-10/5, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-II, New Delhi-110020, INDIA.

SEPTEMBER, 1993

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Dr. Narendra Choudhry

We are especially pleased, on this thirty seventh anniversary year of the founding of AHMM, to have a new story by Henry Slesar. Mr. Slesar, author of many hundreds of screenplays and short stories (more than one hundred of the latter first appeared in this magazine), began his association with AHMM in January, 1957, with "The Trouble with Ruth." A number of his stories and screenplays were aired on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*; he also wrote for such other television series as *Run for Your Life*, *77 Sunset Strip*; and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* His latest tale, after an absence from these pages of over ten years, is "*What Do I Do About Dora?*," and we found it delightful.

As with previous issues, we here bring you not only new stories but some that we particularly like from our past. Among them is "*No Tears for Foster*" by Fletcher Flora, whose tale "*A Soft Spot for Maddy*" appeared in AHMM's very first issue, in December, 1956.

Chief Editor: Dr. Narendra Choudhry, **Editor:** Dr. G.K. Sharma, **Publisher:** Vivek Choudhry, **Circulation:** Rita Choudhry, **Advertisemet:** Sunita Choudhry, **Production:** Parmanand, **Art:** Amar, **Finance:** Madan Verma, **Coordinator:** Rakesh Jain, **U.S. Representative:** Jyoti Agrawal. **Legal:** M.D. Quraishi

Richard Hardwick, author of "Slow Motion Murder," like Mr. Slesar, has his first AHMM story in our second issue.

Michael Shaara, author of "*The Wide and Starry Sky*," wrote only that one story for AHMM, on the other hand, but we think it is a winner. Mr. Shaara, who died in 1988, also wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Killer Angels* (1975).

Finally we want to welcome two new authors, Gene De-Weese and William Beechcroft. Both are established novelists and have short stories to their credit as well. We are glad to have them join the long ranks of AHMM authors.

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Murder by Request

by Beth R. Kiteley

“**G**ive me a good wholesome murder anytime,” she said. She’d said it many times. Over and over, she’d said it, till I could hardly stand it. She was a real conservative, one of those who doesn’t think anything new could possibly be worthwhile. That meant no new scientific discoveries were authentic; no new caves such as Lechuguilla really existed; those small African countries that insisted on carving themselves out of former colonies were figments of their residents’ imaginations.

The list was endless. She didn’t believe in computers; she didn’t even seriously believe in jet planes. And men on the moon? Don’t be ridiculous! That was filmed in some movie studio.

But the crowning insult was her attitude toward literature. I teach literature at a small college. I may not be the best teacher in the world, and certainly will never be famous or have students from all over the world flock to take my classes. But I am competent, and try hard to instill in my students respect for and understanding of literature as a living, changing entity.

Changing. That’s the key word. She didn’t want anything to change. As long as current literature included young women fluttering their eyes and young men running a finger around their collars as the epitome of sexual encounter, my mother was happy. When writing became more realistic, that’s when she hauled out the murder theme.

Thinking I was doing her a favor, I had enrolled her in the Read-of-the-Week Club.

“In the first place,” she said, “read is a verb, not a noun.”

“Customs change,” I replied. “Language is alive, or should be. If it wasn’t, we’d still be talking as Chaucer did.”

“And better for it,” she said. “In the second place,” she hurried on, “these people don’t offer a single book that isn’t dripping with sex scenes, or someone trying to analyze themselves psychologically . . .”

“Not so,” I protested, but she ignored me.

MURDER BY REQUEST



SHE SEEMED JUST AS USUAL, BURIED UP TO THE EYEBROWS IN ANOTHER AGATHA CHRISTIE, MARGERY ALLINGHAM, OR P. D. JAMES.

"... or making millions through fraud, or some other ugly thing I don't want to read about."

"You don't call murder ugly?"

"Of course, in real life. But not in books," she said.

"How about *In Cold Blood*?" I asked.

"That proves my point!" she exclaimed in triumph. "That's about something that really happened. No, I want to read wholesome stuff, so give me a murder anytime."

"You mean a *mystery*," I grumbled.

"Whatever." She closed the conversation by opening her latest purchase from the drugstore and forgetting I was alive.

I stood for a moment looking at this woman who had increasingly over the years become a stranger to me. Had she ever clasped my father in passion? Nursed me at her breast? Washed off blood and scrapes from my skinned knees? Not her—it had to have been someone else. I didn't know this woman. That's why I did it, you see. She was a stranger. I didn't really know her.

I planned it all out first. There wasn't any hurry, after all. And in order to succeed, it had to be absolutely perfect. So I took my time and plotted each step on paper. My headings were The Action, The Consequences, The Coverup, The Alibi, and several others not so vital.

My mother was completely oblivious to all this. She didn't clean my room—hadn't even been in it since I was a teenager and demanded she give me privacy. But to be safe I kept all my papers with me in the big briefcase I luggered back and forth to school. There was nothing—nothing incriminating in that room.

Nevertheless, I watched her carefully when I was home. She seemed just as usual, buried up to the eyebrows in another Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, or P. D. James. Sometimes she forgot to get meals, and after a tough day trying to open stubborn minds, I would have to open just as stubborn cans and make my own dinner. And all the time I was shooting daggers at her head and aching to get to planning my big exploit.

I needed to target a date. It would have to be during the summer. I would be taking the month of July off and had planned to be gone anyway. So that should work out best. As spring advanced, I got down to details in my plan. I discarded several methods—too bloody, or too hard to conceal. Finally I was down to two alternatives—poison or faked suicide—and my mother helped me decide.

She did it by putting out some chicken to thaw and forgetting

it. I came home rather late to find her frantically bustling around the kitchen trying to appear as though she had dinner ready and was just waiting for me. Instead she had just put the chicken on to cook, and it was close to an hour before we sat down to eat it.

It didn't taste just right, but I am used to my mother's cooking so I didn't think anything of it till in the night I awoke with a terrible pain in my stomach and, hurrying to the bathroom, met Mother doing the same.

"Go ahead!" I gasped, and with a hand over my mouth ran for the little lavatory under the stairs.

Neither of us slept much that night, but by morning I managed to struggle to the kitchen and make some hot tea. I took a cup to my mother's room and found her awake, with her light on—and reading a book.

She accepted the tea with thanks and hoped I was better. "What are you reading?" I asked, though I was sure of the answer.

"Well," she smiled, "after such a horrendous night, I wanted something wholesome."

"Why not a cookbook?" I suggested.

"Oh, I wouldn't like that!" she said. "Give me a good murder anytime."

I stood and watched her absorb herself in the pages again. Okay, I said to myself, you asked for it. And now I know how.

July came, and by that time the stack of notes took up one whole suitcase. They could be disposed of soon. I packed, but my mother didn't seem to notice the extra bag. She had just received a stack of books in the mail and was so excited about them she could hardly say goodbye to me.

Our neighbor Martha was there when I was leaving. "I made you some special TV dinners. They're in the freezer," I explained once again. "All you have to do is stick one in the microwave."

"I don't like that thing," she said.

"Fine; then put it in the oven. But, Mom, don't set them out to thaw first; cook them frozen. Do you hear?"

She nodded, but her eyes had slid away to her waiting books. Martha said, "She heard, she heard. Your ma can take care of herself. You run along now, and have a good vacation."

So I did. My hotel room looked out on the beach, where I spent most of my time. First, though, I unpacked and, with a long, cool drink from room service, read through my notes carefully. I could not see a single flaw. The plot was perfect. Now all I had to do was

wait. I changed into beach clothes and, on the way out to start relaxing, sent off the mail I'd brought with me.

The first night there was a bonfire on the beach, I luggered all my notes out and fed them one by one to the flames. Some of the young people, already high on something, found an extra thrill in helping me. They didn't try to read anything; I had known they wouldn't. I teach college students, remember.

The rest of my vacation was spent in peace. No having to devise meals, no hurrying home or back to work. No lesson plans, no arguments. Nothing but waiting. Waiting to hear. Waiting for the phone, or a message from someone in authority. Waiting, waiting. I've never spent a more miserable vacation. Why had I done it, I wondered. What an insane idea it had been.

July twenty-ninth I packed up my things. I had not heard a word. All there was left to do was go home and start lesson plans for my August class. My mother did not meet me at the door. She was out in the yard, her nose in a book. When I called to her, she looked with glazed eyes in my direction.

"You home already?" she said. "How was the vacation?" But her eyes had already returned to the pages.

"Fine," I said drearily. "Just fine." I looked in the freezer and found one TV dinner left. I shuddered and went to the supermarket.

September twelfth was the day it finally happened. I found a letter in the mail when I got home from school. My hands trembled so I could hardly open the envelope, and when the check fell out, I whooped with delight. My mother looked up from her book. "Mom!" I yelled. "I sold a story to a mystery magazine!"

"You what?" The book dropped from her lap as she stood up. "I didn't know you were writing anything."

"I didn't want you to know," I laughed. "I wanted to surprise you. Here, look at this." I handed her the check and the letter.

She read them over as I stood grinning, then hugged me. "This calls for a celebration!" she exclaimed. "I had put out that last TV dinner to thaw—"

"Oh, Mom," I said, "you mustn't thaw them first; you'll get food poisoning again." I dumped it in the trash. "Come on, I'll take you out for a real dinner."

"What made you think of writing a mystery?" Mom asked while we ate.

"Well, you were always saying, 'Give me a good murder,' so I decided I would."

I Killed Him!

by Pauline C. Smith

Paul beat me home from work that day and was already climbing into the new suit on which he was making payments. "Where you headed for?" I asked him.

"Got a dinner date," he said, patting the slim pants down over his legs.

Dinner date! How about that? Talking like a big shot. "With whom?" I asked.

"April."

Well, if you asked me, and nobody did, April Woodruff was too much for my kid brother to handle. At eighteen and hardly dry behind the ears, he was one of these quiet kids, a bookworm, you know? Never went out much with girls. He'd just graduated from high a couple of months before, but now he was working and thought he had the world by the tail.

"Don't get tangled up with that girl," I said, pulling the big-brother act. Well, I had a right. I'm three years older, and ever since our dad died I've been father and brother both. Not that I resented it; heck, no. I just took over after that happened and brought in the

dough and took care of Mom and Paul. Now Paul was helping out, but that didn't mean he knew the score.

"You're just jealous," said Paul, glowering from underneath his blond hedges of eyebrows.

"Jealous, hell," I said. What Paul didn't know was that all my dates were swingers, while he was just the dreamy kind to go all out and get his heart broken.

"Break the date," I said. "We'll take Mom to a movie and give her a blast."

He looked at me scornfully. "Or, tell you what—we'll go out on the town and I'll stake you to a beer."

"Big deal!" he snorted. *He was right. Big deal! Those substitutes couldn't dim out that April-light in his eyes.*

He had his tie knotted by then. In a half-defiant, half-begging tone, he said, "I'm takin' the T-bird in about two minutes . . ."

"Like hell."

He hunched his shoulders and jutted out his lower lip. "It's half mine."

"Like hell," I repeated. Sure, he was helping on the payments now, but for the eight months before that, while he was still in school, I was putting out all the bread. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't that I was one-way about the T-bird. The kid was a good driver and he could usually take it whenever he wanted, but I figured, like a jughead, if I kept him out of the T-bird that night I might keep him away from that little swingin' doll who might swing him right into trouble.

His face screwed up like he was so mad he was ready to break down and cry. He snatched the keys off the dresser and made a run for it, but I didn't play football four years ago for nothing. I just tackled him and left him sprawled on the floor. I sprinted down the hall and out the back door.

"Bill!" Mom yelled, as I swung past her in the kitchen. "Where are you going? It's suppertime."

The screen door banged behind me. "Don't worry," I yelled over my shoulder. "I'll be back."

I snatched the other set of car keys from my pocket and leaped into that beautiful blue job in the driveway, purred the motor alive, angled it around the beatup Volkswagen, and

took off just as I heard the screen door slam again.

There, I thought, that'll hold the kid.

I guess I figured it'd stop him in his tracks. Like a nut, I suppose I thought he'd wait, give that little swinger a jingle, and take himself off the hook, but when I got back to the house the Volkswagen was gone.

"Do you think Paul should have taken that car?" Mom asked me when I got inside the house

"No, he shouldn't," I growled. The Volkswagen's beat. It'd been standing in that driveway just waiting for Paul and me to get under the hood and give it a tuneup job, and I'd told Paul that. "Hands off," I'd said. While I washed my hands for supper, I thought of all the things wrong with the bug—the clutch, sparkplugs, and the brake bands.

While I dried my hands, I thought of the way Paul drove. He was a good driver, calm and cautious, he'd be okay. It didn't have any power so he probably wouldn't get into any trouble, but the idea of his driving the car in that condition bothered me.

"He'll be okay," I told Mom when we sat down to supper. "Yeah, he should have stayed out of that little bug until we got it fixed, but he'll be okay.

He knows everything that's wrong with it, and knowing what's wrong is half the battle." I really thought he would be okay—but I killed Paul because I didn't let him drive the T-bird.

I looked at the clock. It was six thirty.

April can wind me, her Aunt Bessie, around her finger, and she knows it. She is the child I wish I had had if I had been lucky enough to have gotten married and *had* a child.

Her name fits her. April is blonde and lovely, even when her gray eyes go stormy and her mouth droops to get her own way. I work the night shift at an aircraft plant, so she knew I'd be home when she popped in that afternoon about three.

"Hi, Aunt Bessie," she called. Her voice, too, is like an April breeze, all soft and blowing and gay. She grabbed me and kissed me as if she hadn't seen me just a couple of days before, so I knew she was going to try and wangle something out of me—but what difference does it make? I'll do anything for her, just *anything*. I looked at her fondly and touched her shoulder-length hair. *Such a darling!* I thought. *Such an adorable girl!*

"Aunt Bessie, you're a com-

fort," she said, taking the soft drink I poured for her. Throwing herself down on the divan, legs up in their stretch pants, which I don't thoroughly approve of but which I must admit look wonderful on April, she spilled some of the drink on the new upholstery.

I wiped it off and didn't say anything. I want my house to be a place where April always wants to come.

"Now why am I such a comfort?" I asked after I put the towel away, hoping the drink wouldn't stain too much.

"Because you're good to me," she said, raising herself up on her spine and looking at me over her glass with those big gray eyes.

"Come now," I said, a little embarrassed. "Being good to you is easy."

"And because you'll let me call Mike up and ask him over here to see . . ."

"Mike?" I squeaked.

"Mike Connor. You know, Aunt Bessie. You know I'm simply crazy about him, and you know how Mother is . . ."

I tried to be stern. "Now, April, your mother told you you were not to see Mike again." Her lips drooped, and a chill went down my spine. *I don't want April to get mad at me. I don't want her to stay away from here.* "He's far too old for

you. My goodness," I fluttered, "you only sixteen and him a man."

"That's why I like him," she said sullenly. "You think I want to go with boys?"

I clasped my hands and held them tight. "He doesn't even work, your mother told me. He just—just lounges around. You're too good for him, April."

She gave a nasty little laugh. "A lot you know," she said, "about what's not good enough in a man for me. Don't forget, Aunt Bessie, you simply don't know anything about men, not ever having had one of your own."

I wish she wouldn't say things like that. It's bad enough being an old maid without having April, my lovely, lovely April, remind me of it.

"Yes, I know," I admitted. "But your mother said—"

"I know Mother said." She jerked upright, spilling some more of her drink. "But Mother was just making parent-sounds. She's always making parent-sounds and then never following up. Anyway, I'm doing what she wants me to do, which is having a date with a drip tonight, just the kind of drip she likes. What kills me," and she jerked forward this time, spilling some more on the rug. *Oh, dear,* I thought and decided to do nothing about it.

"What kills me, is going out with that drip tonight and not seeing Mike at all. Mike's just wonderful, Aunt Bessie." Her face was all sunshine again. "I've got to see him before I can face that drip."

I wound my hands together uncertainly.

April set the half-filled glass on the floor. She reached out and touched me. "I depend on you, Aunt Bessie. You always understand me. All I want to do is make a little telephone call to Mike and have him come over here. I want to see him, Aunt Bessie. Then I promise I'll go home and get all ready for my nice date with my nice drip and make everybody happy."

"Well . . ." I said, "what time is your date?"

April jumped to her feet, and the glass on the floor swayed dangerously. "Six thirty," she cried and clapped her hands. "You will, then? You'll let me call and have Mike over here? If you do, I promise on my word of honor I'll get out of here on time to get home and have my nice date, and no one, but no one . . ." she cast her eyes ceilingward and crossed her heart. "No one will ever know about it. You'll have my undying gratitude and I'll love you forever."

I laughed shakily. "That's nice, April." *If she just would*

love me forever, I thought. Then I went back to the problem. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't do any harm," I murmured. "After all, you and Mike will be right here in the house, won't you?"

"Right here," said April.

"It isn't as if you were meeting him somewhere else," I quavered, in an attempt to compromise wrong with right. By then, April was halfway to the phone.

I could hear her as she dialed and talked while I mopped up the drink, noticing the ring on the divan—so it *had* stained. April was using a different voice on the phone, a breathless, hurrying, urgent voice. "My aunt says it's okay. So hurry, Mike." Then I heard the click of the receiver and she danced back into the living room.

"Gosh, what would I do without you, Aunt Bessie. You're the *greatest*. Tell you what, if things ever get too rough at home, I'll come and live here. Okay?"

"Oh, stop it," I said, delighted with her words. "Your parents never made it rough on you in your life."

Then she was off down the hall, singing one of those tuneless things that has a lot of "yeah, yeah, yeahs" in it, on her way to the bathroom to put some more of that pink stuff on

her lips the girls are using nowadays but which looks good on April, and some lavender stuff on her eyelids that makes her eyes look grayer than ever.

I hustled around, getting two fresh glasses ready and filling a big plate with cookies. This Mike arrived just as April flew from the bathroom and to the front door to let him in.

He *was* goodlooking. He made me feel limp and inadequate, an older woman like me! It was just that he was so sure of himself, the way these younger people are. He flung an arm over April's shoulders as if he owned her and said, "Hi, Aunt Bessie," as if he'd known me all his life.

He lounged on the divan with April beside him. Then April looked directly at me, her gray eyes like level arrows. "Aunt Bessie, *surely* there's something you ought to be doing, like cleaning the kitchen or doing a washing or something . . ."

"Oh, yes." I stumbled to my feet. "Thank you for reminding me, my dear. Yes, there is something I should be doing. My goodness, the kitchen's a mess now that I think of it. Heavens!"

I knew she was getting rid of me. But who would want an old maid aunt around?

I busied myself in the back of

the house. There wasn't a sound from the living room except an occasional rise and fall of talk, very softly. I supposed they were necking in there. I caught my throat in a cold palm, thinking of them necking in there. I could feel my pulse under the palm of my hand. What must it be like to be hugged and kissed? To be held in someone's arms? To be loved and wanted—to be touched by a good and kind man?

My pulse beat faster, and forked lightning of exquisite pain blazed through me as I thought of it. April was so lovely and so desirable. I wish I could have been a young girl like her, then I wouldn't be alone now. I wish I could have had a daughter like her.

I stiffened. I ought not leave her in there alone with this older boy, this man. I ought not. Her mother would be furious.

I started down the hall. As I reached the living room doorway, they sprang from each other and looked up at me; brown eyes glowering, gray ones stormy.

"Yes, Aunt Bessie?" said April, icily cold through her teeth.

Don't speak to me that way, I thought, agonized. Don't get mad at me. She was disheveled and flushed and looked beauti-

ful. "I thought maybe you'd like some more cola," I said, my eyes wavering toward the table and the still-filled glasses.

"Aunt Bessie. If we want anything, we'll call. Okay?"

I tried to laugh lightly. "Okay," I said. "I'll be in the kitchen."

I sat there on the kitchen stool as the sun began to go down. I knew what they were doing and I shouldn't let them do it. I felt helpless. *Six thirty*, I thought. *Wasn't April's date for six thirty?* I nerved myself up to it, then I called in a thin, reedy voice, "April! It's six thirty. Weren't you supposed to be home by six thirty?"

I waited. She didn't answer. I half rose from the stool. "April?"

"Yes, Aunt Bessie," she answered, her voice harsh, impatient. "Don't come unglued, Aunt Bessie. What's waiting at home for me will go on waiting. I'll get there." Then she laughed.

I shouldn't have let that Mike come here, I told myself. I shouldn't have let April call him. I should just march myself straight in there and tell him to get out and tell April to go home, and tell her, furthermore, if she ever thought I'd go against her mother's rules again she had another think coming.

I stood up, then I sat down again. *Maybe she'd leave pretty soon. Maybe she'd leave still liking her Aunt Bessie.* My hands began to ache, clasped together so tightly.

At last I heard her go down the hall to the bathroom. She was probably putting on another fresh layer of pink lipstick and some more lavender eyelids. Maybe she was fixing to go home.

I hoped so.

The bathroom door squeaked behind her. Her flats made slapping sounds as she left the bathroom and hurried along the hall.

"Thanks, Aunt Bessie," she caroled from the front door. "Thanks a million. You're my favorite aunt . . ."

I raced along the hall, but I missed her. She was just getting into that Mike's car at the curb. I felt all warm and glowing from her saying I was her favorite aunt. Then I remembered: I was her *only* aunt!

It was seven thirty, and because I allowed April to be with Mike in my house all afternoon, I killed that boy Paul that night. . . . Yes, I killed him!

April's mother was in the kitchen, preparing dinner, but her mind was busy: if April weren't an only child! Or if I'd

had her when I was younger. I don't understand the young people of today, that's one trouble. Her father and I have told each other that over and over. "We simply don't know what makes them tick."

I can't help it that she's an only child. We wanted babies from the beginning, but we were the unlucky ones. April didn't come along until we'd been married twelve years.

We couldn't believe it when I was pregnant, at last. Those nine months were a-tremble with waiting. Then, from the very beginning, she was trouble. I suppose she was trouble because I simply didn't know how to handle her.

Beautiful . . . well, she certainly was that. Her father and I used to say, "She looks like an angel," but she didn't act like one. Like I say, she was trouble from the beginning; colic and tantrums, defiance and sneers, outright mutiny and secret disobedience.

My fault, I suppose, and her father's. We love her, but she just about drives us crazy. This dating in particular—she started when she was thirteen. My stars! My parents didn't allow me to step foot out the door with a boy until I was sixteen, and even then they practically went over him with a fine-tooth comb to make sure

he was safe for me to be with. On top of that, I was allowed only one date a week, and had to be home on *that* date by ten thirty. April calls that kind of protection "square." She laughed herself sick when I told her under what rules I grew up. Well, I know things have changed. I watch the teenagers today and I read about them. I understand they have more freedom and they seem to be on a hurry-up schedule, but thirteen—well! When April, thirteen, told me she had a date, I told her she certainly had not. I set my foot down, you can bet—and was treated to the most massive tantrum you ever saw in a girl her age.

I offered a compromise then. I'd get her a new dress. There was one in the window downtown she was aching for and her daddy and I both thought was too expensive, but I bought it for her as a compromise. "Wait until you're fifteen before you date" was the bribe we held out.

By the time she was fifteen I already knew she'd been dating ever since that first time by the very simple method of climbing out her window and meeting her dates down on the corner. By then, I was too tired to argue. Anyway, if I pretended I didn't know, it kept me from worrying so much.

Not that we didn't have our run-ins. We did, constantly. What that girl can't think of! She scares me to death.

I wish she wasn't so popular, but she is and that makes it worse. Take this year—I think it was better when she had a whole raft of boys after her. At least, I figured there was safety in numbers. She didn't seem to care for any of them to amount to anything, and that was fine. Then along came this Mike Connor, far too old for her, handsome as sin, nothing but a drifter. Well, I thought hopefully, *he'll just be one of the crowd, and he'll finally fade out of sight.*

So I was wrong.

"Chop that thing in two," her father told me.

Oh, sure! "You just tell me how I can chop it in two," I came back.

"Tell her. Tell her to give that guy the brush."

"Have you ever tried to tell April anything?" I asked.

"Well . . ." he buried himself in the newspaper the way a man will in order to avoid coming to grips with something he's started.

"So why don't you tell her to give Mike the brush?" I said logically.

His head came up. "You're her mother," he said.

That's always a good answer.

"Talk to the guy," he added. Obviously, her father wasn't going to do anything, so it was up to me.

What I did was talk to them both. This Mike came to the house one night this last week, and while he was waiting for April to get ready to go out with him, I started in. "Mike," I said, "it's not that we don't like you, because we do. It's not that we're trying to be strict, because we're not, but April is young and we're hoping you'll understand we think she's too young for you!"

He just looked at me with that lazy look of his. Try to combat *that!* It leaves you hanging out on a limb.

"We think April should go with a lot of boys instead of just one, so we ask that you give her a chance. Just a month, we ask. You stay out of the picture for a month. Then, after she's dated around for a month, you may date her again, along with the rest."

"Gee, thanks," he said.

I wanted to slap his face.

So then I slammed the alternative at him. "The thing is, if you and April don't see it our way, if you insist on going steady and don't let her grow up first—well, then, we'll just ship her out to her grandparents in the Middle West and you'll never get to see her."

I drew a deep breath. I hadn't actually planned to say that. It was just an inspiration. Actually, I wouldn't think of sending April to her grandparents. If I can't cope, they certainly wouldn't be able to. She'd probably give them both heart attacks.

Suddenly, this Mike smiled and really, he has a very sweet smile. "You know, Mrs. Woodruff," he said, "you're probably right. I am too old for April. She shouldn't go steady—with anyone." He looked up and saw April coming down the stairs looking like sunshine, like bright morning sun. Then he looked back at me. "We'll call it a deal. All right?" and he stuck out his hand. I put mine in it.

"Hi, why so chummy?" called April. "You two shaking hands over a good-neighbor policy or something?"

"We've made an agreement," Mike said.

April stepped off the last step and slipped her arm in his. "What kind of an agreement?"

"Over you," he said.

I hurried in then, and started to explain. I told April how fair Mike was being about it, that we were both looking out for her best interests. She jerked her head up and gave a quick glance at Mike, then she narrowed her eyes at me. "Then

after a month," I rushed on, "you can date Mike again —along with the other boys."

April threw back her head again to look at Mike. "That right?" she asked.

He nodded. "Your mother's calling the plays," he said.

"And Mike agrees," I said quickly. I started to say more, but April cut me off. "Okay, Mother," she said impatiently. "I get the message. Come on, Mike, let's amble."

So I did my duty. I don't know if April's seen Mike since. I don't actually *know* it. How can a mother know such things the way kids run around all the time? She says she's going to Ruth's or Shirley's or over to the pool, but how do I know where she is? Maybe she's there, where she says she is, I wouldn't know.

So along came this day when she said she was having a dinner date with that nice Paul What's-his-name, and I breathed a sigh of relief. If there was ever a *nice* boy, it's Paul; clean-cut, hard worker. He and his older brother take care of their mother now that the father's dead.

I'd be *willing* to have April go steady with a boy like that.

I was so happy about it all, I offered to take her downtown in the afternoon and get her a brand-new dress to wear. Now,

next to a date with Mike, what April likes best is to buy clothes. So I should have been suspicious when she said, "Thanks, but no thanks. I've got this thing all set up with Shirley. We're going over to Ruth's and listen to records . . ." Maybe I *was* suspicious, but wouldn't face my suspicions because then I'd have to do something about them.

"What time is your date?" I asked.

"Six thirty," she told me.

Six thirty, on the dot, there was Paul, all spruced up, such a nice boy, but no April.

Her father and I were so embarrassed we didn't know what to do. I made excuses like, "She must have been detained," and April's father sat down in the living room and talked to the boy about everything under the sun, about when he was overseas, and things that happened on his construction job, and I walked back and forth from the kitchen where supper was burning to a crisp, to the living room to look out the front window.

Finally, Paul, who couldn't help but smell the supper burning, said why didn't we just go in and eat and he'd go on waiting for April?

April's father was up like a flash, and I asked Paul if he'd care to join us. He said no; he

and April were having their dinner downtown; and I said maybe a cup of coffee. He shook his head. So I rummaged around and found a magazine and gave it to him, telling him I hoped she'd be along pretty soon and how sorry I was, then I went in and dished up supper.

Across the table, April's father's face looked like a thundercloud. He mouthed the words: "Where is she?" so Paul wouldn't hear from the living room.

I hunched my shoulders. I didn't know where she was, but I had an idea.

"Is she with that punk?" he mouthed, and I shrugged again.

Supper was awful. I could feel the food pile up in my chest, thinking about that poor boy in the living room, and so mad at that beautiful daughter of mine I could hardly swallow.

We finally finished. April's father moped back to the living room to start talking again, the same subjects he talked about before, the war and his construction job. I scraped the dishes and got them washed, looked nervously at the clock. Seven thirty! Good grief, didn't the girl have an ounce of consideration?

I took off my apron, went back to the living room, and looked out. It was almost

dark—and then I saw her. She was just getting out of a racy red car down on the corner. If I knew that car, and I did, it was Mike's. . . . I'd like to take that girl across my knee and give her a blistering spanking. I went limp and a little sick. Maybe I hadn't given her enough of them when she was little.

She breezed in the house as if it were the middle of the afternoon and she'd never done a wrong thing in her life. "Hi, Mother and Daddy," she said like sugar, then added a little honey to it with her "Hi, Paul. Sorry I'm late. Be with you in half a minute."

The minute she came in, Paul had struggled to his feet and stood looking at her with dying calf's eyes all the way up the stairs. He sat down again with a sickly smile on his face. He didn't resent her being an hour late one bit! He was just gloriously happy she was there at all.

She took her time. Wouldn't she, though, and came down looking like a flower of spring. They walked out to his little Volkswagen at eight thirty.

I should have forbidden her to go at all. She had insulted that boy, so I should have made him realize it, and kept her home. She should have been punished for disobeying and for

being rude. Instead, I watched them go together—and that's why I say I killed Paul that night. I was the one who killed him!

April's old lady really bugged me, old Mike Connor, the night she pulled the warden bit and said I couldn't show around there any more. I gave her the stare, and she began to back down and mumble around about letting April play the field a month and then I could edge back in and be one of the crowd.

"Gee, thanks," I said, letting her know she wasn't putting anything over on me.

Then she let fly with a low blow, an "If you don't watch out, we'll just ship April away—to where you won't see her any more . . . , and I knew I'd have to play it cool or she might do just that, so I got all clean-cut-American-boy, told her I understood and I'd play the game according to her rules, which almost knocked her over.

For a minute, when April got into the picture, I thought she might louse up the scene. She wasn't about to have any of her old lady's bright ideas. I let her know, just by hugging her arm, to hit the low pedal and we'd play it by ear.

She went along with me the way that sweet little dame al-

ways goes along with me, and out in the car I said, "What do we have to lose?" Her old lady couldn't have the leash on her every minute, and there was that nutty aunt of hers. We could always meet there.

So we did, that day. April phoned me just like it was set up and we had some real sweet hours with her aunt holed up in the kitchen chewing her knuckles to the bone.

I got her home at seven thirty. "Call the date off," I said. I'm really gone on this little dame.

"We'll ruin everything."

Well, maybe we would at that. I watched those stretch pants race up the street and found I couldn't breathe very well. I rolled my red baby over to Vic's and had a few beers.

Some of the guys came in and said what was the matter with me, I acted like I was draggin'. I said I was draggin'. My babe was out with another guy.

"You takin' it?" one of them asked.

"I'm being patient," I said.

"Patient gets you nowhere."

Well, the way I felt, patient just got me all tied up in a knot.

"Who's the guy?" some big-mouth asked.

"Paul Somebody," I said. "Who the heck cares? He's only a cover."

"Maybe he's covering your girl," one of the other guys said.

I wanted to take him, but I got my arms pinned behind my back, and we all started drinking. Then the pictures began to come. Pictures on my brain, you know? Seeing what those two might be doing . . . Same things we were doing in the afternoon?

I sat there, brooding in my beer. "We can all go over to your girl's house," some wise-guy suggested. "We can sit around and wait for this joker to bring her home."

It sounded like a good idea at the time.

I looked at my watch, blinked my eyes, shook my head, and finally the numbers came clear. It was almost twelve. I batted the side of my head with my fist, trying to remember. What was it April had said? "We're just going to have dinner, then a show. Don't worry, Mikey we'll be home by twelve thirty. He's a nice boy. A *real* nice boy."

Nice boy! Nice, hell. He was out with my girl, wasn't he?

I got up. "Come on, guys," I said. "Let's go."

A bunch of them piled into my red job. Somebody else had a white sedan. There must have been eight, nine guys by then. I lost track. I led them off the main drag out through

Mariposa Place and into Victoria Heights. I was going by feel, not by sense, by then. The red beauty was leading us, like a stallion on its way home for its feed.

The Woodruff house was dark. Natch.

I parked across the street, the white car right behind me. I held my watch down in the ring of the dashlight. Twelve twenty it was then. I snapped off the headlights. I heard the tin can sound of a car that needed a hospital job. I tensed up. I bet that was her and the guy.

I waited then, my stomach one big knot.

I killed that guy, Paul Whatever-his-name-was. I killed him.

As the Volkswagen whined to a stop in front of the curb across the street, I opened the door and put my big foot down on the pavement, then I started over there and *I killed him.*

Mother always makes me, her darling April, see double when she lays the law down. Her lips get all primped up and she gets a do-or-die expression on her face. If she'd only just say it, I might go along with her. But she tells me things as if she expects me to do just the opposite, so what do I do? Just the opposite. What else?

Yes, I'm nuts about Mike, but I know myself well enough to know I could get nuts about someone else, too. It's the way Mother does it, her I-know-you-won't-mind-me-but-I'm-giving-you-the-word sign, and there I am, digging in my heels just to see what her next move is going to be.

Mother's next move was to brief Mike, which I think was a pretty low trick. I'm her daughter, so why does she have to go crying at Mike? There they were, when I came down the stairs that night, looking like a newspaper picture on the society page, shaking hands as if one of them had just declared the other one President of the Club.

"We've made an agreement," said Mike, then the two of them danced around in their words all about how I was to date everybody for a month, then bring Mike back in the fold. *What kind of a deal is that?* I looked up to him to see if his head was on straight; that's when he gave me the sign to take it easy by squeezing my arm.

"Okay," I said. Anything to get out of the house, out to where I could breathe some good free air.

"You see, baby," Mike told me in the car, "we'll play it her way and our way too, and what can we lose?"

Sure. I suppose. Mike thought he was pretty smart, like a diplomat or something. I wondered how he'd feel when I was *really* out on a date with someone else, so when Ruth and I were over at the pool and I saw this Paul, I thought it was a good time to find out. Paul was a grind at school and a loner, but he always hung around the fringes, gulping. Just let me flick him a smile and he went limp as yesterday.

He worked around there somewhere, and it was his lunch break. He was hanging onto the fence, staring through me, so I swayed over, all bubbly and happy to see him with a couple of "how wonderfuls," watching him run his sweaty hands down the sides of his dirty jeans.

It wasn't hard. He went through a few stiff motions, telling me where he worked and how it was a dirty job, so I'd understand about the jeans, swallowed a few times, then asked me out to dinner with a show afterward.

No pain. No strain. I said sure.

"He's cute," Ruth said afterward.

"You're a nut," I told her. She is.

Mother was so flattened out when I told her about the date, she offered to take me downtown and get me a new dress.

She always offers me a new dress either for joy at some unexpected obedience, or as a bribe to get me to obey.

It scared her when I said, "Thanks, but no thanks." In her what's-she-going-to-do-next mind she must have been turning somersaults.

What I did was to go over to Aunt Bessie's. Now, there's a character for you. I always want to feel sorry for her, poor old thing with her horse face and her smile that forgets to turn itself off. I wonder what it's like never to have had anyone mad about you? Never to have been kissed or loved? Crazy!

Like I say, I always want to feel sorry for her. I even go soft and melty, and think about good deeds like being nice to her, but she spoils it.

She hovers and breathes on me, and her eyes get excited. She lives through me, that's what she does. She scampers to try to please me and falls over her own feet. Then I go cold and watch her in action.

Poor Aunt Bessie! Sometimes I'd just like to run as far as I could run and be around people who didn't make me feel like that, so I could relax.

Well, Aunt Bessie was a pushover. All I did was kiss her and hug her a little. That made her simper and scamper, so I spilled some goop on her new

upholstery and watched her face fight it out. Should she wipe it up and maybe make me mad, or should she just forget it and hang onto me. She split the difference with little dabs of the cloth, and I let it slide.

I told her she was a comfort and so good to me and what would I do without her, watching her glow like I was spreading sunshine rain. To find out how I was doing, I dribbled a little more from my glass. I was doing okay. She left it alone.

Then I brought up the Mike subject and I watched her freeze and waver. I had to hit her where it hurt, right down into her manless soul. Then I pulled her up again with some chummy explanation and a few digs at my mother. If there's anything that'll get Aunt Bessie back on the track, it's digs at my mother. If Aunt Bessie can't be me, she wishes she had a daughter like me. That'd give her a man to have a child by, and the child, too. Aunt Bessie doesn't fool me. Aunt Bessie's just wracked by frustration.

Sure, she came through. What else? She went limp and affirmative, and I gave Mike the jingle he'd been waiting for impatiently.

Mike's a good necker. I go all hot even thinking about him. I think about what might happen the next time, and every nerve quivers.

That's the way it was at Aunt Bessie's. Of course I had to tell her to get lost. She sat there all big-eyed, staring at him and me, thinking about how it would be. So she scampered.

Once it got to be too much for her. She popped in just when the going got good to chatter her teeth about refills, and I had to send her back to her corner.

I knew she was chewing her fingers to the elbows back there in the tinware department. She must have been rocking with excitement and anxiety at what she figured was going on in the living room and, finally, she must have been counting the ticks on that old fashioned clock of hers when I let date-time slip by.

I let it go by an hour. I knew Paul would be waiting for me.

Then we got out of there and Mike took me to the corner of my block. I blew in the house, and the picture was just like I knew it would be: Mother furious, her face like stone, but she wouldn't let out a peep, I knew; Daddy looked helpless without any expression at all; and Paul, popping to his feet with a wave, relieved.

I know what they ought to do, but they don't do it. Mother should have lashed out, Daddy should have let me have one right across the face, and Paul should have left long before.

I danced up to my room and took my time. Okay, they waited this long, let them wait a while longer.

Paul spent all the time we were driving downtown to the restaurant apologizing for the Volkswagen. "Yeah, it's a clunker," I agreed. It sounded like it was ready to fall apart. He drove slow so he could roll around the corners, the brakes being not so good.

He couldn't get up' enough power from one stop light to another to do anything except make rabbit jumps.

He told me all about the T-bird he owned with his brother. "So . . ." I looked at him straight, "how come we're not in that T-bird?"

"My brother's got it," he said, and that figured.

I was never out to dinner with a boy in my life before. A pizza at Sam's, sure, or a hamburger at the Hut—but dinner with waiters and menus and linen napkins! I acted as if I had dinner with a boy eight times a week, so we sailed through that one with Paul dropping a fork, and fumbling around scared-eyed in his pockets wondering how much to lay down for the tip.

After that, we went to a movie. Not a drive-in, but an honest-to-gosh inside movie in the loge seats! I slipped my hand in Paul's and meant it. He

was a *nice* boy, and I was beginning to like him, really. I could almost relax and not put on any acts. It was *pleasant*—that's the word. Things haven't been pleasant much in my life. They've been rocky or gorgeous or sticky, but not just plain *pleasant*. Pleasant's a fine way to feel.

I squeezed his hand through the dramatic scenes, and let mine lie limp in his through the in-between ones. Then we went out into the night, which was warm but not too warm. Just right, I guess.

He asked me if I wanted a malt or something. I said no. The evening was topped with whipped cream already. I liked this evening. I wanted it to stay just this way, and I'd sure be willing to have another, anytime he said. We walked arm-in-arm to that little broken-down Volkswagen. It was twelve o'clock, I noticed on a clock in a jewelry store window.

Paul took the side streets to avoid traffic. He promised *next time* we'd go in the T-bird, and he'd show me how he could make it really sail. I sighed at the "next time." *How nice!* I thought. But there wasn't going to be any next time.

It must have been almost twelve thirty when we clanked up to my curb.

Paul switched off the motor. That's when I saw the white car

parked across the street. In front of it, then, in deeper shadow, the little cut-down job, was it—yes, it was red!

I tensed and leaned forward. I heard the car door open and saw the leg come out. There was just enough street light to see it was Mike, all right, as he stepped on the pavement and started across.

Then boys spilled out from both cars.

"Drive!" I screamed at Paul. "Hurry!"

The Volkswagen motor coughed.

Mike was walking his long-legged panther walk, angled from his car to ours, toward the curb and my side.

"Hurry, hurry!" I screamed.

The Volkswagen leaped, growled deep, and jumped slowly from the curb. I turned on my knees, looked out the back. The boys wheeled and swarmed back into their cars.

Paul was trying to work up speed. Perspiration poured down my clammy back. "Who are they?" Paul stuttered in a high, thin voice. He was bent over the steering wheel as if, by his shoulders, he would give it pickup. He clashed the gears.

"Mike," I yelled. "It's Mike and his gang."

The Volkswagen gained some speed. I beat my fists on the back of the seat. "Can't you make it go *faster*?" I breathed.

He ground the gears again. The Volkswagen rolled and jumped and took on some more action.

The two cars U-turned. Tires squealed.

"Who's Mike?" Paul's voice was still high and thin like a thread of sound in the clatter.

"Mike. It's Mike," I repeated. "He's after us."

The little Volkswagen made a lot of noise. The red car gained. The white slipped up beside it, and both of them roared after us.

Still on my knees, I looked back over my shoulder out the windshield. "Turn left," I screamed. We could lose them if we got to Elm, then twisted on Poplar and angled off in an alley that doubled back.

The Volkswagen made a wide unbraked turn, jumped the curb, then back on the street, skidding to the next turn. The two cars behind us roared around the curve.

"Right on the next one," I screamed.

Paul spun the wheel. The Volkswagen skidded. The whine of no brakes squealed in the sky. The thud of the curb flopped me off my knees. A shadow in front of us loomed.

I jerked my arms over my eyes. The door on my side swung open. A blinding, tearing crash split the night.

I flew through the air. I landed on something soft as a mattress. I rolled.

I could hear the clash of brakes in the street, and the spin of a wheel as it raced, then slowed to a stop.

A porch light went on. A voice shouted something. Another one screamed.

Painfully, I got to my hands and knees; finally, to my feet. The ivy was thick and tangled my steps. Blindly I staggered toward the tree, its trunk broken, the Volkswagen smashed like an accordion.

The red car and the white car were both angled in the street. The boys clustered there, not going any closer.

Someone from the house yelled, "I'll call an ambulance."

Someone from beside the Volkswagen, a flashlight in his hand, called back, "It's too late."

My muscles went to jelly. I dropped to my knees in the ivy. I struggled up again. I crept to the Volkswagen and looked down into the circle of light from the flash.

I held my breath. A big, tearing sob tore through my body. I leaned closer and gagged.

Then I screamed. I screamed and I screamed.

"I killed Paul!" I screamed. "I killed him. I kill'd him. I killed him."

What Do I Do About Dora?

by Henry Slesar

I write this report out of twelve years of sheer habit. You can't be a cop that long without feeling the obligation to wrap up a case with a typewriter ribbon. Even when you're not sure the case is really closed. Even when you don't know if you'll file the report at all. That's something I can't decide until I figure out what to do about Dora Belmont.

I suppose I should put a starting date on this. It isn't easy. Officially, the Lenox Hill Murders began eighteen months ago, on the day Zorina Mac-Levy was having a wash and set at Le Tierce and told Maria that she wasn't feeling well, proving it by vomiting into the sink. She was dead five minutes before the ambulance arrived, and the autopsy showed the presence of a slow-acting substance that the medical examiner had tentatively identified as "helvellaic acid."

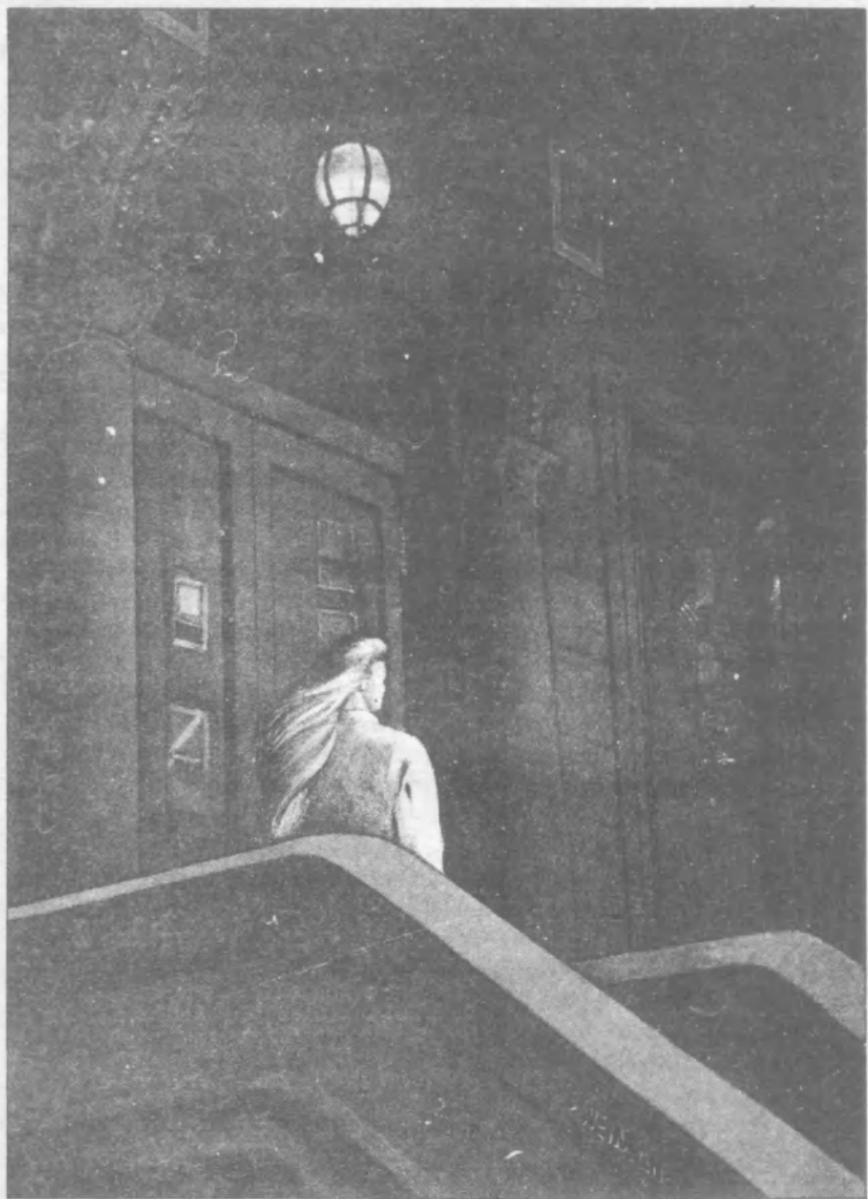
Zorina was called Victim Number One, but I doubt it. My guess is that she was Number Three or Four, and that these Upper East Side slayings may

have begun as long as four or five years ago.

Now that I've stuck my neck out this far I might as well speculate about the real Victim Number One. I think her name was Fawn Desmond. Not many people will remember Fawn Desmond's passing, with the possible exception of a widowed mother in a trailer camp in Dover Plains. Fawn was twenty-three, a dance hopeful who never got beyond auditions, a party girl and a cocaine user, and on a bad night following a bad day she smashed her two-seater into a bridge support on the Major Deegan and died. No, there was nobody in the other seat, and the car hadn't been tampered with, but I think she was murdered just the same. I'll tell you who did it, and how, in just a minute. Be patient.

The second victim's name may be more familiar. Kimberly Kane, born Emily Seidman. It was the model agency that changed her name, and that got her pretty face on two magazine covers and the rest of her into a *Playboy* spread. That was enough exposure, and I use

WHAT DO I DO ABOUT DORA?



DORA WENT UP THE BROWNSTONE STEPS QUICKLY, WITH BARELY A GLANCE AT MY PARKED CAR. SHE DIDN'T SEEM NERVOUS.

the word precisely, to earn her a few lines in the press when a combination of alcohol and barbiturates ended her young life. Same old sad story, right? Wrong. I think Kimberly Emily Seidman Kane was murdered.

I just can't be flatly positive about Victim Number Three. Her name was Susan Blauwitz. As you can tell, nobody changed her name. But Susan wasn't a model; she was a secretary at a brokerage firm on Wall Street. One day she failed to report for work and was never heard from again. A brother from Cincinnati came to New York to make inquiries, and her Missing Persons report is still on file. I think the report is misplaced. It think it should be listed under Homicide. But the rules are clear. No corpse, no case.

Which brings us back to Zorina.

I was one of half a dozen detectives assigned the task of nailing Zorina MacLevy's poisoner. There was heavy pressure on the department to come up with a quick arrest, since Zorina chose to get herself killed on a slow news day. The *New York Post* featured the story on its front page, referring to the dead woman as a "Beautiful TV Star" because Zorina had appeared in two,

count 'em, two, episodes of a sitcom. The *Daily News* wasn't far behind, coming up with an investigative report claiming that Zorina had been the mistress of a real estate magnate named Egon Ferrin. Even the good gray *Times* joined the chorus by obtaining a statement from Ferrin himself, who not only denied the relationship but stated that he had been in Sydney, Australia, at the time of Zorina's final visit to her hairdresser.

Now here's the funny part. All three newspapers were right. TV star or not, Zorina was beautiful. She was also Egon Ferrin's mistress. And Egon Ferrin, true to his word, was almost ten thousand miles away when Zorina died.

Five out of six cops on the case decided to look in other directions for Zorina's killer. A spurned lover. An envious girlfriend. A psychopath with no logical motive. Only one of us decided to stay with the Egon Ferrin connection. That was me.

I had my reasons, even if Captain Finegold didn't think they carried much weight. It was because of a conversation I had with the millionaire's ex-driver, a stocky little man whose cataracts had put him out of the chauffeuring business. Too bad. He had the per-

fect chauffeur's name. James.

James wasn't reluctant to talk about his former employer. He had a grumbling resentment against the family, despite the fact that Ferrin had paid for two failed eye operations and retired him on a decent pension. I asked him about it, and James said:

"It's that bitchy wife of his. When I couldn't drive no more, I asked if I could do gardening on their Palm Beach place. She said nobody with my eyes would make a mess of her lousy roses. One thing about the cataracts, I didn't have to look at her ugly skinny face no more."

It was the perfect lead-in to my next question.

"Sounds like you couldn't blame the man for having a girlfriend on the side. He did, didn't he?"

"Well," James said slowly, "I minded my own business. But there was a lady he talked to a lot on the car phone."

"You must have heard her name," I said.

"All I heard was her first name."

But it wasn't Zorina. It was Susan.

It took me another week to determine that Susan's last name was Blauwitz, and that Egon Ferrin might have had a perfectly legitimate excuse for calling her as often as he did.

She was the secretary of his broker. But the next three things I learned made the situation more interesting. Susan was pretty. Susan wore mink. Susan was missing.

It was in the police file that I found her brother's statement. Allen Blauwitz had seen his sister only two months before her disappearance. She had paid the family a visit in Cincinnati, perhaps with the express purpose of showing off her new wardrobe, including the mink. Allen had been suspicious about the source of her new acquisitions. He suspected what he called a Sugar Daddy. I was able to prove his suspicion correct, simply because the mink was fully described in the report. It was a full-length black willow made by the exclusive furrier Pons-Silva. Arnie Kaplan, the majordomo of the firm, reluctantly opened his books to me, and I learned that the purchaser was Egon Ferrin.

To be fair, the original investigator from the MPB uncovered the same information, and even talked to Ferrin. It had been smoothly explained. Ferrin had bought Susan Blauwitz the coat to thank her for her services at the brokerage house. What the police neglected to learn was that her services were also performed in her neat one bedroom apart-

ment in a building whose lease was held by one of Ferrin's realty companies. Even more fascinating was the fact that the former lessee had died under unhappy circumstances. Her name was Kimberly Kane, and guess what? She owned a sable coat from Pons-Silva. Some girls prefer sable to mink. It's a matter of taste.

It wasn't a fur coat that led me to Fawn Desmond, it was a car. A friend of mine in Accident Record Transcripts, knowing of my pursuit of the Egon Ferrin connection, paused at my desk one day to drop off a four-year-old file marked DESMOND. The section he thought might interest me was the registration of the vehicle involved in the Major Deegan crash. It was a secondhand Porsche, and the original owner had been Mr. Ferrin himself.

I was left contemplating three, maybe four dead young women who might all have been mistresses of the same man. If this was coincidence, it was the kind that makes a cop sleep badly at night.

There was still another set of facts for me to contemplate. The real estate tycoon was nowhere near striking distance of the four victims at the time of their deaths. He was Down Under when Zorina went down and under. He was in Zurich

when Fawn Desmond died in the wreckage of her used Porsche. He was in the Caribbean when Kimberly Kane's body was found, and in Santa Fe when Susan Blauwitz vanished from the face of the earth.

Location, location, location.

For a while, I speculated on the possibility of a hired assassin, but the more I thought about it, the less likely it appeared. Assuming Ferrin wasn't a psychotic killer, what practical reason would he have for removing all those pretty girls from his life by calculated violence?

That's when I had my idea. I couldn't call it a "theory" because I didn't have any corroborating evidence. And I knew better than to share it with anyone in the department, especially Captain Finegold. It was the kind of idea that couldn't be presented to anyone without bright red ribbons of proof.

But I did decide to reveal it to someone. I called Dora Belmont and asked her to lunch at the Patron.

Maybe you know the restaurant. It's around the corner from Trinity Church. There's a brass plaque at the door that claims a pedigree going back to Revolutionary days. I doubt it. But it has one useful feature. The American Colonial tables

are spaced far apart, and there are half a dozen booths that are virtually soundproof. I needed a booth like that to talk to Dora about those four dead girls and what I wanted Dora to do about them.

I got there first, so I had a good view of her pushing open the etched glass doors and checking her elegant fur-trimmed coat. She wore her hair short and her dress long. It was conservatively cut, no decolletage. She wasn't the Dora I used to know, but she was even more beautiful than in her days of flashy sexuality. Who says people don't change? You should have seen Dora Belmont eight years ago, when she called herself Doreen and never earned less than five hundred a trick.

It wasn't a prostitution rap that brought us together; it was the extortion of a bent cop named Smalley. I was working in Internal Affairs that year, and I didn't enjoy the work, but it was a pleasure to put the skids on Smalley when he beat up Doreen for not making her weekly payoff.

Dora didn't turn tricks any more; she said she was too old, but she was barely past her thirtieth year and looked younger. She worked in a fancy department store and candidly confessed that she was waiting

for some bachelor millionaire to notice her, but none had come along. She was one of these women who talked about their biological clock ticking, but it was still hard to envision her as a mother. Despite the quiet hairdo, the subdued attire, there was something conspicuously carnal about Dora Belmont. Eyes followed her all the way to my table.

She gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek. It always gave me a rueful feeling to realize the paternal role I had assumed in her life. But Dora was always glad to see me, and she exaggerated her indebtedness. I wondered how she would feel when she realized that today was the day I was calling in her marker.

Zorina MacLevy's name came up before we ordered our bloody Marys—or rather, one bloody Mary and one virgin. I don't drink on duty, and that was Dora's tipoff that the luncheon was all business.

"What makes you think I know anything about Zorina?" she asked, wrinkling her perfect nose. "All I ever did was sell her a few Sonya Rykiels."

"I never knew you even met her."

"She came into my department one morning and bought everything in sight. She must have spent fifteen thousand

dollars in half an hour, but I guess he could afford it."

"You said 'he.'"

"Come on," Dora clucked. "You know damned well who paid the bill. And let me tell you something, virgin. Egon Ferrin didn't slip that poor girl a Mickey. I know that's what you're thinking, but it just isn't true."

I've always been surprised at how much Dora knew about me. Maybe I'm more transparent than I think I am. I smiled and put her intuition to another test.

"All right," I said. "Why are you so sure he's innocent? Because he was out of town when she died?"

"No," Dora answered, with a hint of a pout. "It's because he has such a nice face."

There was no arguing with that kind of logic. So I tried another kind. I told Dora about Fawn Desmond. I told her about Kimberly Kane. I told her about the missing, presumed dead, Susan Blauwitz. With no little satisfaction, I watched her plucked eyebrows begin to meet in the middle of her forehead. She began to crumple the paper napkin in her hand, and then said:

"I still don't believe it. I know he's rich, so naturally everybody thinks he must also be a mean bastard. But every time

I've seen the guy he was—a gentleman." She said the word reverently.

"I didn't say he wasn't," I told her. "And I didn't accuse him of murder. The truth is, I don't think Ferrin had anything to do with their deaths. I think he was as shocked and surprised as everyone else—more so, probably. I just wonder if the same thought ever crossed his mind that crossed mine."

"What thought?"

There was no one within hearing range, but I dropped my voice just the same.

"That his wife killed them."

I could have timed it better. Dora's hand shook violently, and unfortunately it was the hand holding the bloody Mary. My shirt changed color, but I didn't really care. Since my divorce five years ago, there had been nobody at home to complain about the mess I made of my clothes. Or my life, for that matter.

"No, I never met Mrs. Ferrin," I told Dora. "Seen pictures of her. She reminds me of that old saying, that a woman can't be too rich or too thin. Me, I think she's too thin. I wouldn't know about rich."

"It was her money he started with," Dora said, trying to mop at my shirt with the napkin. "I read that in *People*. She put him into her father's real estate

business, but he did the rest himself."

"Almost a self-made man."

"He must have felt grateful to her. That's why he stuck to her all those years."

"To her, and at least four mistresses."

"Men like that need a little something on the side," Dora said coolly.

"Would you say that if he were your husband?"

"If he were my husband, he wouldn't need anything on the side." She smiled. "I'm too good a main course."

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly what I was thinking."

But I waited until we had our own main course—I had the chicken salad, as usual—before I delineated the flimsy structure of my theory. I told her about Sandra Ferrin's never traveling with her husband on his business trips around the globe. Sandra was always home, and it was possible that she took advantage of his absences to arrange encounters with Mr. Ferrin's latest side courses.

"Take Zorina," I said. "Why couldn't Mrs. Ferrin have simply called her and suggested a discreet lunch somewhere? Perhaps even in her own brownstone. Oh, Zorina might have balked at the invitation, but she also might have been afraid

to turn it down. So Zorina goes to lunch to meet her boyfriend's wife, to hear what she has to say, expecting threats, cajolery, God knows what. But not expecting what she received."

"Poison?" Dora gasped.

"I've been spending a lot of time with Forensics lately," I said. "Those are the people who try to figure out how people get murdered. Their best guess about what killed Zorina was something called helvellaic acid, or maybe deadly agaric—also called 'death angel.'"

Dora shivered.

"What are those things? Where do they come from?"

"Mushrooms," I said. "The bad kind of mushrooms. One of the oldest poisons around, and maybe the easiest to administer. They can be dried and chopped up and mixed with food and drink. The poisonous varieties degenerate vital organs, but it takes some hours for them to take effect."

"Oh, my God," Dora said, poking into her salad. There was nothing in it but young greens.

"The same dish could have been served up to Fawn Desmond. She could have come to lunch at the Ferrin home in Greenwich, for instance. She would have felt all right when she left, when she got into her little two-seater and drove back

into the city. But then the pains would have started, and she might have convulsed so badly that she lost control of the wheel."

"I think I'm going to be sick myself," Dora said, but I noticed that she continued eating.

"As for Kimberly Kane, it would have been easy for the medical examiner to overlook the presence of the poisonous mushrooms, considering all the barbiturates and alcohol the woman ingested regularly. But don't ask me about Susan Blauwitz. All I'm sure about is that the woman is dead. For all I know, she's lying at the bottom of the East River or in one of Mrs. Ferrin's ponds on her estate."

Dora put down her fork. Not because she was impressed by my argument, but because her plate was empty. She looked me squarely in the face and said, "What is this, Dukey?" (I hate to tell you that was her nickname for me, because my last name is Duke.) "What does all this have to do with me? Why don't you just go and arrest the woman?"

"Because I'd get slapped upside my head," I said wryly. "Because I can't prove one word of what I just said. I don't have any evidence that Sandra Ferrin ever met these women, that she ever served them lunch,

that she ever laced their food with death angel or anything else. I just believe it's true, Dora. I think she's defending her marriage with plain and simple murder. For all I know, she may have killed a dozen women since her husband started straying. And there's no reason to think she'll stop with Zorina MacLevy."

"Now answer the first question," Dora said crisply. "What does all this have to do with me?"

"I need somebody to help me prove it. I need someone, Dora. Just as Egon Ferrin must need somebody new in his life."

There was nothing slow about Dora Belmont. She saw what I was after at once. To her credit, she didn't say anything about being "bait," or putting her head in a noose, or anything that obvious. She merely asked, "Why don't you get a policewoman to do it?"

"Doreen, baby," I said, deliberately using her old name, "there are no policewomen who look like you."

I admit it was raw flattery, but it was probably the only effective weapon I had. Dora licked her upper lip and looked at me thoughtfully. Instead of the litany of objections I was waiting to hear, she asked:

"How would I even get to meet the man?"

I breathed out gratefully.
"I think I have an idea."

From this point on, I have to reconstruct what happened between Dora Belmont and Egon Ferrin.

My idea turned out to be feasible. The next morning, Dora telephoned his office and managed to get past a three-secretary barricade. She said her business concerned his personal account at the store, and she refused to discuss it with anyone but Mr. Ferrin. Ferrin was annoyed at first. But when Dora spoke, he recognized the discretion that motivated the call. It was a simple problem, she told him. There were some designer dresses ordered in his name that hadn't been picked up. The store manager wanted to send them to his home address, but Dora thought he might want them dispatched in some other manner. Ferrin said he might at that, and suggested that he drop by at noon.

If Ferrin had been impressed by her tact, he was even more impressed by her appearance. While she chatted on about his options regarding the dresses, he was looking into her sea-green eyes and appreciating her china-porcelain complexion. While she concluded the transaction, he watched her

body movements. By the time she had taken care of matters, well into her lunch hour, Ferrin decided she deserved a reward. He took her to a quiet restaurant where he was known and welcomed and understood. He had the oysters.

I never had any doubt that a womanizer like Egon Ferrin would react positively to a woman like Dora Belmont. She caught him in a period of deprivation. He needed a beautiful woman's flattery. He needed those sea-green eyes locked into his, making silent promises of loving intimacies to come. Dora was too smart to use aggressive tactics. She played it shy, reluctant, maybe even coy. I don't know. I wasn't there. All I know is, he called her late that night and asked her if it was true that she had never been on a sailboat in her life. (Somehow, the subject had come up at lunch.) Wistfully, Dora assured him that it was so. Egon offered to provide the experience. He said there would be a plane ticket waiting for her at LaGuardia, and a reservation at a small hotel in Bar Harbor. She'd receive the rest of her instructions when she arrived.

Dora was thrilled. She told me it was like being in the middle of a spy novel. I didn't tell her I was hoping it turned out

to be a murder mystery.

It was almost three weeks before I heard from Dora again, and it was a time of frustration and concern. Colby, one of the detectives on the MacLevy case, came up with a suspect named Bob Lowey, who had been Zorina's boyfriend prior to her liaison with Ferrin. To be honest, I was alarmed at the possibility that Lowey was really the culprit. He had the credentials. He was a biologist at a downtown laboratory, the sort of person who might know how to get his hands on poisonous substances. I hated the thought of Colby's smug smile if it turned out that I had the wrong solution and he had the right one.

Even worse, what if we were both right? If Lowey had gotten to Ferrin's mistress before his wife did? Lowey's indictment might leave Mrs. Egon Ferrin free and clear to dispose of her husband's newest love interest. Which, judging from her progress, would be Dora Belmont.

I learned about that progress at the very same table in the Patron restaurant. Dora breezed in looking more like her old self, in a new fur coat so long that it almost swept the floor. I couldn't see the label, but I was willing to bet it bore the trademark of Pons-Silva.

Dora was flushed with excite-

ment, and there was more than the usual incandescence in her eyes. It was immediately evident that Phase One of my plan was working.

What wasn't so apparent was that Phase Two had already started.

"She called me," Dora said flatly.

"She?" I said.

"Mrs. Sandra Trowbridge Ferrin."

She didn't say another word until her drink arrived. Not a bloody Mary this time. A martini. Something faster-acting.

"That's the way she introduced herself," Dora said. "On the phone. Her full name. She has a voice like a razor blade, have you ever heard her voice? A blade that's been used too often. It sent chills up my spine."

"My God," I said. "Does that mean she already knows about you—and her husband?"

"Want my opinion? I think that woman knows when her husband sneezes. I think she follows that poor man around every minute of the day, or has him followed. That new chauffeur of his, for instance. I think he's a spy for Mrs. Sandra Trowbridge Ferrin."

"Well, what did she say?"

"She suggested that we have a little private conversation. She said it would be to 'my advantage.' I haven't heard that

phrase since I watched *Upstairs, Downstairs.*"

I put my hand over hers. Her fingers were icy.

"Maybe I should have expected her call, after what you told me. I mean, it all fits."

"What does?"

"Egon is going out of town. Tonight. He's going to a directors' meeting, in Atlanta. She asked me for lunch, Dukey. Do you hear what I'm saying? Lunch."

I tried to look calm, which I wasn't. "Lunch where?" I asked. "A public restaurant?"

"No. At her home. Her town-house on 65th Street. She said we'd be able to talk more freely there. She asked if a light lunch would be all right with me. Something simple. Like soup. Or a sandwich. Maybe a small salad." The hand under mine jerked away convulsively.

"Take it easy," I said softly. "Nothing is going to happen to you. I told you from the beginning. All I want you to do is bring me the evidence, if there is any."

"Like my dead body, is that what you mean?"

"You're not going to eat anything that woman puts in front of you. You're going to feel faint, suddenly. You'll ask her for a glass of water, an aspirin, anything to get her out of the room. When she leaves, you'll

sneak some food samples into a plastic container in your purse."

"What if she doesn't get me the water? She could send one of her servants. I'm sure she has plenty."

"If she does, there has to be a Plan B. But I doubt it, Dora. I don't think Mrs. Ferrin will want to have this intimate conversation with servants standing around. I think you'll be alone."

"Oh, God, I hate her," Dora said, squeezing her eyes shut. "I've never met the woman, and I hate her. What she's done to that nice man, the way she keeps him on a leash like a puppy."

"I don't want you to hate her," I said. "I want you to be afraid of her. If you can't handle the situation, just get out of there. Just leave, even if you can't pick up those samples."

"Then she'll get to me some other way," Dora said miserably. "She'll send me poisoned chocolates or something. I have a terrible sweet tooth, Dukey. I'll be afraid to eat chocolates or sandwiches or salads for the rest of my life."

"We'll stop her," I said firmly. "That's a promise. We'll stop her and send her to prison."

"And good old loyal Egon will stick by her," Dora said gloom-

ily. "That's the kind of puppy he is."

There was good news (bad news?) when I got back to headquarters that afternoon. Detective First Class Colby was in a black mood. Three witnesses had just corroborated Bob Lowey's alibi for the time of Zorina MacLevy's death. The one and only suspect had been cleared. The case was still wide open, and my theory was still alive. The question was: would Dora Belmont be, after her encounter with rich, thin, malevolent Sandra Trowbridge Ferrin?

I began to worry about it more and more as the luncheon date approached. Dora had made the appointment for Thursday, which gave me thirty-six hours to regret the whole idea. Dora was bright and gutsy, but I knew nothing at all about Mrs. Ferrin's evil qualifications. If I was right, she had committed four or more murders without incurring the slightest suspicion. How could I be sure she wouldn't succeed again, even if every precaution was taken? If Dora simply refused Mrs. Ferrin's lunch treats, would the lady also have a Plan B? Lucrezia Borgia would.

By Wednesday afternoon I had decided to call the whole thing off. Just before noon, I

went to Dora's Fifth Avenue department store with a prepared speech running like a continuous tape in my head. I was going to tell her to cancel the lunch. Even more important, I was going to ask her to kiss Egon Ferrin goodbye, to make sure that she was out of harm's way.

I thought Dora would probably breathe a sigh of relief, but I knew I was wrong the minute I stepped out of the elevator into the hushed atmosphere of Dora's floor. Right in front of me, absently browsing through a rack of designer dresses, was Egon Ferrin himself. He was shorter than I had imagined him. He was balding, and a little bit pudgy. He didn't fit my image of a dynamic executive, but there was little-boy wistfulness in his face that must have appealed to Dora. I could see that when she suddenly appeared behind him and touched that face with both hands. Ferrin turned, looked around quickly but failed to see their only observer, me. Then he took Dora in his arms and they kissed. When they parted, and I saw the dewy look in Dora's eyes, I knew that there was no way I could convince her to kiss him goodbye for good. I turned and caught a down elevator.

On Thursday morning, after a night of bad dreams, I woke

up with an inspiration. I called Dora at home and told her my change of plans.

"Never mind about asking Mrs. Ferrin for a glass of water. Or an aspirin. I've got a better idea to get her out of the room."

"What is it?"

"I'll telephone the townhouse. I'll call her just as she's served your lunch."

"How will you know that?"

"You'll let me know," I said. "The townhouse has large front windows, one in the living room, one in the dining room—lunch is bound to be in one or the other. When it's served, you walk to the window and look out. You can comment on the weather. Anything. I'll be in a parked car across the street. When I see you there, I'll call from the corner phone booth."

"There's probably a telephone right in the room."

"I'll identify myself as a police officer. I'll tell Mrs. Ferrin the call is confidential, that I have to speak to her privately. She's bound to leave the room then."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then forget the whole thing," I said flatly. "If anything goes wrong, forget about it. Say you feel sick and can't eat a thing. Get up and walk out. Don't take any risks. Dora, it's not worth it."

"Isn't it?" she said. There was something sad about the tone of her voice. I tried not to think about it.

There was alternate side of the street parking on 65th Street. Fortunately, Thursday was a day that left the side opposite the Ferrin residence empty. I parked my car at eleven thirty and got a road map out of my glove compartment. I studied it like a civilian looking for a way out of the city. At fifteen minutes to noon, a middle-aged woman with a dead-white complexion came out of the house. From previous surveillance, I knew her name was Frieda, and that she was the Ferrin cook. She was leaving. I prayed that Mrs. Ferrin had dismissed all the other servants.

At five minutes past noon, Dora's cab pulled up. She wasn't wearing the fur coat. She went up the brownstone steps quickly, with barely a glance at my parked car. She didn't seem nervous. But then, I couldn't see her face. If she had seen mine, she would have known that I had enough anxiety for both of us.

I had angled the rear view mirror to keep the front door in sight. I breathed out hard when the bell was answered by a thin woman in a severe gray dress. Even in the narrow frame of

the glass, I recognized Sandra Trowbridge Ferrin from her pictures in *W.* It seemed to confirm the fact that the townhouse was servantless, that this luncheon was strictly *a deux*.

Then Dora disappeared inside, and I was left alone with my apprehensions.

Well, you probably want to know what went on in that house, what wife said to mistress and mistress said to wife. Here's the best I can do in the way of recreation, as Dora told it to me.

"How nice of you to come," Mrs. Ferrin said, in a voice like ground glass. "I understand you're very knowledgeable about fashions."

"Is that why you asked me to lunch, Mrs. Ferrin?"

The woman smiled with a set of expensive teeth. "No, of course not. I'm sure you know why I asked you here. So we could discuss our mutual problem."

"What problem is that?"

"Perhaps I should say mutual interest," Mrs. Ferrin said. "But let's sit down and be comfortable. I thought we could have our lunch here in the living room. I'm afraid all my servants are out today, so I'll have to do the serving."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh, no. Frieda has everything prepared. All I have to do is bring it in. Would you care for something to drink first?"

"No, thank you," Dora said.

"I won't be a moment," Mrs. Ferrin smiled, and left the room.

It was all so "commonplace." That was Dora's word for her first five minutes in the Ferrin townhouse. If there were angry fires burning inside the lady's flat rib cage, she didn't let a spark show. If there were passions yet to be unleashed, there was no sign of them. If there was going to be murder committed . . . well, there was only the lunch tray the woman carried into the room. A small tray, undoubtedly solid silver, with two Limoge china plates brimming with an appetizing salad. Dora analyzed it with her eyes. There were pale green shoots of arugula. There were slim slivers of endive. There was a touch of watercress, a few leaves of Boston lettuce, some diced tomatoes, scallions, and chopped mushrooms. The dressing smelled of olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

When Mrs. Ferrin placed the dishes on the coffee table, Dora knew it was time to move to the front window and comment on the weather. But her feet felt nailed to the deep-pile carpet. She was paralyzed into inac-

tion. When Mrs. Ferrin asked her to sit down, she stared at her blankly, and then dropped into the Louis XIV chair designated for her. She started to panic as she realized that she had nullified my instructions, but there was no way she could rise and go to the window to give me the signal I was waiting for.

And there was the salad.

"I hope you'll like it," Mrs. Ferrin said, her fork already entwining an arugula leaf. "Frieda isn't very imaginative about salads and soups, but her roasts and potatoes are simply fabulous. Egon is very much a meat and potato man, have you noticed?"

"No," Dora said. "Not really."

"He's terribly difficult to feed," Mrs. Ferrin smiled. "But he has his favorite restaurants and they know all his idiosyncrasies. I'm sure you've been to the Citadel, and the Angelo Park, and all those other secret little places he likes to go to. At least, when he isn't dining with me. I suppose you could call them his 'other woman' places. Why, you're not eating your salad, Miss Belmont."

"The truth is, I'm not terribly hungry," Dora said.

"Of course not. Because you're nervous. You expect me to become unpleasant, don't you? That at any moment I'll drop all this cordiality and turn

on you with vicious accusations." She laughed lightly. "Please relax, Miss Belmont, I have no such intention. I just thought it would be better for us to know each other. Better for us, and better for poor Egon. Do try the salad. It's lovely."

Dora picked up her fork, and the telephone rang.

Don't tell me there isn't a Providence, and I don't mean Rhode Island. The phone rang, and Mrs. Ferrin picked it up. It was her husband at the other end, calling dutifully from Atlanta as promised, and she was obviously too uncomfortable to take the call in front of his mistress. Or in front of a woman she was planning to murder.

"Excuse me just a moment," she said, and put the telephone on hold. Then she left the room.

Of course, I didn't know what was happening. I was still sitting outside, in an automobile that had suddenly become claustrophobic. Less than fifteen minutes had passed since Dora had been admitted to the townhouse, but it seemed like half a day. Why hadn't she appeared in the window? How long was lunch going to be delayed? Was my whole theory invalid? Or had Sandra Trowbridge Ferrin chosen some other way to dispose of this new threat to her marital bliss?

Ten minutes later, I could no

longer sit. I left the car and went to the corner telephone booth. I dialed Mrs. Ferrin's number, and listened to a gratifying sound.

It was a busy signal.

It was exactly thirty-five minutes later that the front door of the townhouse opened again. I held my breath as I watched Dora emerge. She didn't look any different. She wasn't wobbly on her feet. She didn't look like someone I'd have to rush to Lenox Hill Hospital for a stomach pumping. It was just my Dora, as beautiful and statuesque as ever. I resisted the impulse to honk my horn, to jump out of the car and accost her, to shout my curious questions across 65th Street. I simply stood by while she hailed a cab and was gone in a light cloud of exhaust fumes.

I don't know where I found the patience to wait to hear from Dora. I remained at my desk at the precinct, listening to Detective Colby's continuing lament about the MacLevy case. I didn't tell him that the case might be reaching its climax, that Zorina's poisoner might soon be nailed by the contents of a lady's purse.

It was close to four thirty, and my patience gave out. I called Dora's apartment, but there was no answer. I called the department store, but Dora

hadn't reported for work that day. Then I remembered her former roommate—what was her name again? I couldn't remember, but I still had the old phone number. I called it half a dozen times until it was finally answered at five thirty. The roommate's name was Jennifer, and no, she hadn't seen Dora lately. But she had spoken to her last night, and Dora said something about going "south." I had to chew on that for a moment before I came up with the name "Atlanta."

I wasn't only baffled, I was indignant. I felt betrayed, doublecrossed, and most of all, confused. What had gone wrong? What had happened in the Ferrin living room that changed Dora's mind? Why hadn't she called me? And what happened to the evidence she was supposed to have brought me?

Well, you know the rest, of course. You know how Frieda, the Ferrin cook, reported for work the next morning and found Mrs. Egon Ferrin on her living room sofa, fully dressed and completely dead. Her thin body was contorted by the convulsions she had suffered. Her gray dress was soiled. Her eyes, even in death, retained a look of furious resentment.

The autopsy had no trouble establishing the cause of death. Mrs. Ferrin had eaten a meal

that didn't agree with her. It was a salad, liberally laced with a deadly acid obtained from a plant commonly known as a skunk mushroom. In all likelihood, the substance came right out of the woodlands on the Ferrin estate in Connecticut. It was an odd way to commit suicide, but that is apparently the way she chose.

According to her cook's testimony at the inquest, Mrs. Ferrin had been acting oddly all day. She had given all her servants the day off. When Frieda volunteered to fix her lunch, Mrs. Ferrin told her she planned to dine on last night's leftover salad. No, she hadn't expected any visitors. The woman was alone, as potential suicides prefer to be.

Yes, there was only one salad in evidence. I was the only person who knew that there had to be two. The other salad had obviously vanished into the disposal in the kitchen sink. The plate that held it had been carefully washed and dried and replaced in the cupboard. If Dora Belmont was anything, she was neat.

It wasn't hard to figure out what happened. The only thing I'm not sure about is whether the idea occurred to Dora on the spot, or whether she

planned it all along. But when that phone rang, and Mrs. Ferrin left the room, Dora didn't scoop up the evidence that might have sent the lady to prison. No, that wasn't good enough. That wouldn't have left Egon Ferrin completely free. In a way, he would be his wife's prisoner just as she would be the state's. No, Dora had a better idea. She simply switched the two salads. And the unsuspecting Mrs. Ferrin got a taste of her own poison.

Some people might call it poetic justice. Some would call it murder. When I realized the truth, I didn't know which group I was in. I didn't know if Dora was completely wrong or completely right. I didn't know if I should blow the whistle or dance at her wedding.

Oh yes, there was a wedding. Dora married Egon Ferrin six months after his wife's death, and guess what? Her biological clock is ticking no more. At least, it's only counting down the months to the birth of her first child. You ought to see how Dora looks pregnant. Her skin glows like gold, and her eyes are so luminescent you can't look her in the face without blinking.

I wish someone could tell me what to do about Dora.

The Wide and Starry Sky

by Michael Shaara

Hemminge sighted the Cessna from an altitude of nine thousand feet. It was rising slowly up toward him, coming in from the west, lifting to cross the bare rock mountains between Dawson and Cedar Creek.

When Hemminge saw it, it was still so far as to be only a faint winged speck against the white ground haze, but Hemminge had very good eyes, and Hemminge had been watching for it, for any plane. He circled with great care, his heart pounding. He did not think the Cessna could see him, but he was going to make certain. He circled slowly to the east, making sure that he would come down on the Cessna from out of the sun.

It was a magnificent day for flying. The air was clear in all directions over the black hills, clear and still. The ground haze was thick and white, but that was all the better; it drowned the land in a soft steamy ocean, blotting out everything but Hemminge and the Cessna and the mountains that rose up out of the mist in great black

wedges. Hemminge went into his dive, his heart beating violently, but his hands steady and his mind clear. Nerves of iron, Hemminge thought, you must keep nerves of iron. The hand mustn't tremble now like it did the other time, when you nearly botched the job and missed and almost let him get away. No. This time you must be clear, and calm, Hemminge thought, as Sunday morning, Easter Sunday. He was picking up speed now, swiftly, easily, gliding down the sky in one long silent swoop, boring down on the Cessna like a sleek, silent arrow. Remember, Hemminge told himself, keep the mind clear and the hand steady, remember the plane will kick to the right when you fire and correct for that, remember that you are faster than he is and must guard against overshooting, and remember to recover quickly, because he must not have time to use his radio—but now the Cessna was rising up toward him with exploding suddenness, and he centered it in his sights in the last instant and

began firing from a long way off. The bullets reached out in gleaming streams and went into the Cessna, exactly into the cabin, exactly between the wings where he had aimed them. And then they had time to stitch forward quickly across the motor cowling and chew at the propeller before he had to lift his own plane slightly to keep from collision, diving on past the Cessna in a roaring split second, but even so he could see it beginning to wobble.

He pulled out of his own dive in time to see the Cessna begin to fall. It was smoking, but not yet really burning. It fell, leaving a long slow smudge in the sky, and Hemminge swung to follow it down, his heart beating even more wildly now with the joy, the exultant joy of the kill. He did not think that there was anybody alive in the plane, but decided to make sure. He bored in once more on the Cessna and gave it a long burst, the coup de grace. He pulled up then and circled and watched it fall, beginning to burn at last. And when it went in, he circled sadly and gave a grave, proud, tender salute, the victorious airman to his fallen enemy. He turned off at last and opened his plane up wide, heading for home. He felt very fine. It had been a good clean kill.

* * *

"At least they were dead before it hit the ground," Harry Ball said.

Captain Lockwood had nothing to say.

"Isn't it about time they got the bodies out?" Ball asked.

Lockwood shook his head. "Need a torch for that. Have to wait until tomorrow."

Ball stared up into the sky. Night was coming, but more than that, there was wind and heavy rain. Off in the west, black clouds were rising; he could see lightning flashing and heard the rolling growl of thunder. He looked down again into the mangled cabin and said, "One of them was a woman."

Captain Lockwood looked at him. There was no expression on Ball's face. He was a young man. He had been a state trooper for less than five years, but he had long since learned the law officer's quiet, calm, silent look, and nothing showed on his face but what he wanted there. Yet Lockwood could tell that he was moved.

"They must have been just going off on a vacation," Ball said.

The plane had come down in a box canyon about thirty miles due east of Cedar Creek. It had been sighted early that afternoon, but there was no road

into the canyon. Army helicopters had to be flown down from the air base upstate. There had been a doctor in the first copter, but he turned out not to be necessary. The other copters had carried men from the sheriff's department and the state police, and a man from the Civil Aeronautics Authority. They were gathered now on the floor of the canyon in the growing dark. Nobody was saying much and two of the army men had made a fire out of brushwood, and the light of it flickered weirdly across the jagged wreckage of the plane. The army men wanted to get out of there before the approaching storm came down, but nobody else was in a hurry. They were all looking at the plane.

The plane was no longer a plane, but only big ripped shards of silver metal spread all over the canyon floor. The Cessna had been entirely metal; it had not burned very much, but had come down into the rocks like a bomb. There was nothing recognizable except here and there the flat surface of a piece of wing, or tail, and it was these that bore the bullet holes. An army man had been the first to notice the bullet holes. Nobody else quite believed him until they saw the holes themselves. The main evidence was one door of the

plane, the right door, which had been hurled away from the wreck only slightly damaged. There was no doubt that the holes in the door were bullet holes.

The door was lying now at the feet of Harry Ball. He was staring at it rather than into the crushed bloody mass of the cabin. Ball had seen many an auto wreck and some even worse than this, but still, this one jarred him. He did not yet know why. Afterwards he would figure that it was probably because he was a pilot himself, in his spare time. He was a tall man with a slightly bent nose in a rugged, patient face. There was that about him, the tall, blue-eyed look, that had made some of his buddies give him the nickname "High Noon." He towered over Captain Lockwood. He stood without saying anything, feeling a weird, peculiar disgust. Lockwood did not say anything either, and after a while they were joined by Jack Biancoli of the CAA. "They're bullet holes all right," Biancoli muttered, still stunned.

"What are you going to do?" Lockwood said quietly.

Biancoli shook his head. "Listen," he said earnestly, "you think it was murder? Or do you think somebody's just gone nuts?"

Lockwood shrugged. "Can't tell yet. We're checking on the two in the plane. But I don't think we'll come up with anything. It figures to be a nut. It has the feel of a nut. You know what I mean?"

"It sure does," Ball said.

"Well," Biancoli gestured vaguely with his hands. "What can you do for me?"

Lockwood remained silent. He was a slow, thorough man and he had not yet had time to focus on the problem. After a moment he said:

"You ground everybody in the state. We'll get help from the air force, help search for the guy."

"Can't do that," Biancoli insisted grimly. "Can't ground everybody; businessmen would raise hell. And how do we even know he's from this state? Might be registered anywhere, even Canada. I can't even guess what make plane he's flying. Could be anything from a Cub to a converted pursuit—"

"No," Harry Ball interrupted. "The killer must have been flying a light plane."

"Why?" Lockwood said.

"Well, trying to shoot down a little plane like this from a real fast plane like a converted army job is harder than it looks. A regular fighter's much too fast. It couldn't turn with a real small plane. It'd have one

sweet time trying to get a shot at any little plane if the little plane had warning—"

"If the little plane had warning," Biancoli muttered.

"It still figures to be another light plane," Ball said, "for other reasons. First, those were thirty caliber bullet holes—"

"You fly, Harry, don't you?" Lockwood said suddenly.

Ball nodded.

"Got your own plane?"

Ball shook his head.

Lockwood went on looking at him thoughtfully, then said, unexpectedly, "Good," and turned to Biancoli.

"First we check the mental hospitals," Lockwood said. His voice was firm; he had studied the problem and was beginning to shift into high gear now. "Find out if there's a record of anybody anywhere who had delusions about being a war ace. Next we alert the air force and ask them to post a couple of squadrons high up over this whole area. Then we try to blanket the area with radar, radioing the air force to come on down and look if any plane starts making suspicious moves. In the meantime, we start checking planes for evidence of weapons. Another thing, if this guy has a gun in his plane he's flying from a private strip. That ought to be easy."

"How about checking the gun itself?" Biancoli said. "There must be a record . . ."

"No dice. There must be thousands of unregistered machine guns in this country. No way of checking. But there aren't too many private strips."

"I hope to God you're right."

"There's one thing. You'll have to figure whether or not you want to issue a warning to all pilots."

Biancoli started. "What?"

"If this is a nut, he'll be up again, looking for somebody else. If we can pass this off to the papers as just another wreck, not let anybody know we found the bullet holes, the killer'll be maybe a little less cautious about coming out again."

Biancoli blew a breath, rubbed his face nervously.

"Otherwise," Lockwood went on, "the nut might just possibly pack up and leave for somewhere else. Take the gun out of his plane and ship it to another state, and start all over. And we lose him."

"Sam," Biancoli said, his face turned suddenly strange in the dim light of the fire, "listen—"

"It's your choice."

"No. Listen. This has been nagging me. I didn't—last week two planes crashed in these mountains." Harry Ball felt a sudden chill. "They were

both little Cubs," Biancoli said. "They both burned. The weather was perfect; we couldn't figure why they went in. We inspected the wrecks, but we couldn't do much out here, in the hills. But listen, we weren't looking for bullet holes."

Lockwood nodded.

"All the fabric was burned," Biancoli said. "We never saw any bullet holes."

"I think you better check again."

"It could be that this one nut got all three of them."

"It could be," Lockwood said. "My God."

"A nut is a nut," Lockwood said. "With a nut, you never know. But he'll be up again looking for somebody else, that I guarantee you. You check on those other two wrecks. In the meantime we'll—" he stopped abruptly, turning to glance at Ball. He thought for a moment, then swung back on Biancoli.

"We can try a trap," he said. "We'll get some private planes and have them fly back and forth over these mountains. If this joker comes out again our boys will have radios and the air force will be waiting up high, in jets." He swung back to Ball. "Harry," he said, a very faint smile in his eyes, "you seem interested. Want to volunteer to fly?"

"Yes," Harry Ball said.

Under the wide and starry sky, dig the grave and let me lie. The phrase was running through Hemminge's mind over and over and over again, the silent peaceful beautiful words soothing and smoothing the mighty pain in his head. He was lying on a cot on the screened porch in the darkness of night. It was raining heavily, blowing down through the screen on him, and he was soaked through, but he did not mind it. The cool water on his face dulled the pain, the pain, which was all he could think about. All through the rain there was wild white lightning, but Hemminge could not see it. His eyes, whether open or closed, saw only the strange, glowing, jagged lines that were a part of the headaches, had come with the headaches for as far back as Hemminge could remember. The pain was always bad, but the pain of this one was enough to drive a man out of his mind. I'll go mad, Hemminge thought, I'll go mad. Under the wide and starry sky, under the wide and starry sky . . .

Yet the headache was going away. In the midst of the pain he could sense the slight lessening, the nerves quieting, dulled now before the awful

pain they could no longer feel, and Hemminge began to be dazedly grateful. Earlier, the pain had been so bad he had been sick to his stomach. Under the wide and starry sky, he thought, remembering at the same time the misery of that sickness. But the headache was definitely going away. The fact that he could think proved it was going away. But under the wide and starry sky, dig the grave—there, now even his vision was coming back. He had just seen a flash of lightning.

He lay for another hour on the couch. The pain was not gone, but it was bearable; compared to what it had been, the pain now was nothing. But he was exhausted. He lay on the couch until he had some energy; then he stumbled on into the kitchen and made himself coffee. On the way into the kitchen he had to go through the living room, and there almost tripped over the body of his wife. Looking down at her, suddenly the vision of her bloodied head hit him with a shuddering knife blow in the chest. The memory of what he had done to her blossomed stark and murderous before he could shut it out. But he did not want to think of it. Toodle-oo, toodle-oo, he thought, and that was the end of it. He made his coffee and went wet and drip-

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ping back out to the porch.

The rain was letting up. In one of the last flashes of lightning, he saw his plane perched blue and lovely, alive, on the strip by the house. A wave of love for the plane came over him, a proud, gentle love. He raised his coffee cup toward the plane. *Thee and me, he thought lovingly, we are one flesh.* He drank the coffee and lay down.

But the trouble with lying down was that you always thought too much. You are pretty far gone, aren't you? he told himself, in a burst of brutal clarity, but mercifully that faded away and his mind went back to the muddied fragments of poems and dreams and sweet violent visions that were all that was left of him now, Arthur Hemminge, a small fat man with graying hair, not yet fifty years old.

Now he could no longer stop himself from thinking. Visions passed through his mind like black flak bursting around a dying plane. My father was a proud and virtuous man—vision of his father in a fine flying uniform—and now I'm a pilot, too, Hemminge thought, and wouldn't he be proud now—but hate, hate, Hemminge shuddered with hate for his father. And he could admit it now, what a wonderful feeling to roll and revel in the hate for his fa-

ther—who did not want me or anything or anybody, but the fine proud talk about flying, and, and . . . Before other memories of his father Hemminge's mind halted, and swung off down the dark halls of his life, passing the mother he had loved who was dead, and the son he had loved who was dead, and now even the wife, and my God, Hemminge thought, what I love is all dead. And visions now arose of great planes sweeping through the sky like black vultures and Hemminge began to cry.

I had a father, Hemminge thought, and I had a son, and . . . and now I've gone mad.

He knew that, from time to time. The most horrible moments of all were when he could see himself clearly, when he could no longer blot himself out and bury his mind in visions. It was peculiarly horrible the way it had happened—things seemed to reverse themselves, not like you expected it to happen at all. First the pain and the visions and the weird flowing feeling, especially at night. During those you knew you were going insane, but did not know what to do about it. Then the electric pinging sensations that came and went, and periods of total blackness, from which you awoke with sweating horror wondering what of

all those things you had dreamed was real, and what wasn't.

And then gradually, but with increasing swiftness, the true breakdown, the orgy in the mind, and the last muffled cry for help, and after that nothing, nothing, the shadow world and the red figures all around you and death, from which you rose in brief bright flashes of clarity and saw yourself as you had become, the clear tragic moments which were the most horrible of all not only because of what you had become, but because there was no longer any possibility of help, of cure, you were this mad thing here and would be this mad thing until you died. Under the wide and starry sky . . .

In psychiatric clinics you can find many beautifully written, clear and clinical reports of just what things it took to drive a certain person mad. In the case of Arthur Hemminge, the prime mover would have been, of course, the father, the tall proud war pilot whom Arthur loved and whom the father not only never loved, but never hated either, just simply ignored. Hemminge's mother, who would have loved him, died too young. That was a contributing factor. The father forced Arthur to fly too early, after filling him with

wild, terrible stories of how planes crashed, and so embedded in the boy a fear of airplanes, and of heights. That was also a contributing factor. Arthur's only son became a pilot, and was one of the few American airmen to be killed in the Korean War. That was probably the final factor. The report would say of Arthur Hemminge that he had fixed on airplanes as the cause and solution of all his life's pain.

And so when Arthur Hemminge took his father's inheritance and bought himself a lonely place in the mountains and learned, finally, to fly, the fear of heights now suddenly, oddly gone, and built himself a private landing strip and began his weird path of murder, the reasons were obvious: by becoming a pilot himself he could take his place at last with his father, his son, a man among men, a fighter pilot among pilots, and yet at the same time he would be destroying the things that had taken the loves of his life from him—airplanes.

All this a report would say simply, and with truth, and yet—Arthur Hemminge was forty-three years old before he broke. It took him forty-three years of bitter building to bring him to the moment when his mind fragmented like pulverized glass and he became the odd

horrible thing that he became, but it took forty-three years to do it. Forty long years of memories and events entered one after the other in endless succession, day after day, a tiny moment here, a gesture there, words overheard and words spoken directly to him, memories of his small son, brutal memories like the telegram from the War Department, sweet contrasting memories of his mother. All added together brought the moment when he went, finally and for good, insane.

To understand what Arthur Hemminge was is to understand all of those moments, to enter into Arthur Hemminge's mind. And a clinical report is not enough for that, whole books are not enough for that, there is a mystery to insanity which remains a mystery, even to the insane. Most of all, perhaps, to the insane, who sometimes 'have, like Arthur Hemminge, those terrible moments of clarity, rising like islands in a boiling sea.'

So Arthur Hemminge lay on his couch in the desolate midst of nowhere, his mind filled with the roiled visions of madness. He had killed his wife the day before, when she found out what he was doing and wanted him to go to a doctor. He could not help thinking about her,

and from her he thought suddenly—women and children. Women and children must die in a war, because that is one of the things that makes war so terrible. And he thought: a pilot not only shoots down planes. He strafes. He bombs. Visions of bombs bursting among crowds of civilians swarmed in his brain.

I have to do that, he said aloud. All pilots have strafing missions. So I must bomb crowds. He sat up on the couch. He tried to think. Now where could I find a big crowd?

When Harry Ball got to Pat's house, it was very late and she was not in a good humor. She was standing in her doorway, tapping her foot, looking very small, soft, blue-eyed, and delightful. Looking at her, he began to hunger for her, gently, dangerously, and he pulled himself back. Remembering, he told himself, she's got a backbone of steel. Don't be fooled by the softness, or you'll be in trouble.

"Hey," he said happily.

"Well," Pat glowered, "have a nice vacation?"

"Honey," Ball murmured, soothing, reaching for her.

"Now, none of that," Pat fended him off, "you promised me you'd be here by eight o'clock—"

Ball kissed her. She was stiff and unbending and then suddenly she melted, coming to him, and he held her close for a moment silently. He had driven a long way that night and he was tired and maybe that was part of it, but he suddenly wanted only to hold her and feel the warmth of her all the rest of the night. I'm in love with you, he thought, the words rising in his mind, shocking and warming him. But he said nothing. When he released her she looked up at him, her eyes searching, and then she said: "You. Oh, you," and then turned and went away from him, going for his coffee.

He went to her father's favorite chair and sat down. He looked after her, shaken. Pat was the one and only girl he had been dating for the past six months. She was a nurse in the hospital at Dawson. He had known he was in love with her for several weeks, but he had not said anything about it. He did not know what to do about it. Pat was possibly too much for him. When he was with her, he was never quite sure just who was in command, under that fluffy exterior lurked a girl with a mind of her own. Harry Ball was old fashioned enough to want to be the boss in his own house. And honest enough to realize that with Pat he

might not be. She was more than strong-willed; she had "education." Because Ball had not gone to college himself, it was a barrier between them.

It was not Pat's barrier; it was his own. He knew that, but he could not seem to help it. There was a certain poise in Pat, the way she used words, the words she used, the ease with which she could carry on conversations about things Ball did not know. Education and intelligence are two different things, and Ball knew that and knew also that he was no fool, but . . . he had a deep inviolable belief that a man should not feel inferior to his wife. He had a need in him to father, to protect. So he said nothing. And went on falling in love with her, falling slowly, helplessly, like a man sliding down a long, long glacier.

She came back with coffee and plunked it down by him, and plunked herself down on his lap. He reached up and turned out the light and there were a few lovely seconds in the dark, and then she reached up with determination and turned the light on again.

"Coward," he said.

"Uh-uh," she shook her head teasingly, then slyly tapped her temple. "Brains. Part of my foxy campaign." Which brought it up all over again.

Ball frowned. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Ball turned away.
"A hard day."

He began to tell her about it and soon he even forgot that she was still on his lap.

"They're giving you a plane?" Pat said, startled.

"Yep. A Navion. Lockwood borrowed it from some big wheel in the state government. There're about six more volunteers. We'll all be flying back and forth in shifts. We'll catch the bugger. But boy, isn't that something?" He chuckled. "To be paid for flying?"

"The poor man," Pat murmured.

"Poor man?"

"The man you're looking for."

"Poor man?" Ball repeated, astonished.

"Well, he's insane, obviously."

Ball stared at her. Pat looked down at him coldly.

"He's a sick man," she said.

"Most policemen just don't seem to realize . . . well, you shouldn't talk about him as if he were just another . . . purse snatcher."

Ball dropped his eyes. After a moment he said:

"I get it. Time for a lesson in psychology. All right," he reached out for his coffee. "Go ahead."

She looked at him for a mo-

ment. Then got up off his lap.

"Well, let's have the lecture," Ball said.

"If you're going to act like that—"

"I know I don't know anything about psychology," Ball said. "I know I'm just a dumb insensitive clod. But honey," he leaned forward brutally, "this here poor man you're talking about has killed, altogether, six people, six real live human people. Two of them women. Killed them for no damned reason in the world that makes a difference to me. If we don't get to him very quickly, somebody else who is alive right at this moment, walking around healthy and full of beans right now, will be spread all over the county maybe this time tomorrow."

Pat sighed. "Harry, I wish you wouldn't—"

But Ball went on relentlessly. "You say he's sick. Yeah. Well. The people he killed are just as dead as if he was healthy as a pink hog. I don't want to know his temperature or his pulse or any of that. I leave that to people like you. My job is to get him. If I run across him, I'll kill him."

Ball had not meant to be that brutal, but all of this had jarred him.

"What an awful thing to say." Pat rose, flushed.

"Listen, now, this is my job. I don't mind you passing judgment on Cezanne or how to do a hysterectomy or any of that, okay. But this is my job, and I am not bad at it. My job is to see that this joker does not kill anybody else, and if I have to kill him to do it, then that's my job, and this poor man stuff is not for me."

"So that's what it is," Pat said softly, staring at him. "Your pride has been hurt. It's your pride."

"Pride, hell!" Ball said. Now he stood up. "I've seen it too many times. We're always the villains, guys like me, the brutal cops. Every day we get the sociologists, the psychologists, coming down and telling us what we do wrong. You've got to treat poor Ferd gently, he's not a common criminal, he's sick! And so we give them poor Ferd and they treat him in some understaffed hospital and have to let him go too soon and then we only have to get him again, and again . . ."

"I'm sorry," Pat said, still staring at him. "But you know, I don't think you'd kill him."

"You don't think I would, huh?"

"You couldn't anyway. You won't have a gun."

"They're arming the planes," Ball grinned. "Old Lockwood's having them install guns in the

planes, just in case. He said he wouldn't send his boys looking for any killer without a chance to fight back."

"Now you're being melodramatic," Pat said, stiffening.

"Another four-barrelled word," Ball said. "Where's my hat?"

"Harry," Pat said. He stopped.

"It's the college, isn't it? That's what holding you back."

"Holding me back from what?"

"From loving me."

It was the first time the word "love" had ever come out between them. Ball said nothing. He stared at her, tortured by the sweet sight of her, by the proud rage within himself.

"Harry," she said, pleading.

"No," Ball said. "It's no good. You won't even leave my job alone. What am I if you take over my job?"

He went on out the door. He did not look back. Something inside was telling him that all this was ridiculous, that he would probably never even see the killer, that some of what she had said was right, was true, but . . . he did not turn back. He drove home through the same rain that was falling, at that moment, on Arthur Hemminge.

The next day Hemminge did

not fly. He was busy preparing bombs. He wasted a lot of time trying to be complicated and exact, but in the end he decided on simple gasoline. He puttered away most of the afternoon, humming with delight. But just before sundown, he went back into the house and stumbled again across the body of his wife.

After that he had a very difficult time. He could not seem to think clearly. Almost immediately the headache began coming back. The glowing lights began again in the corners of his eyes; he could feel the pressure building as if black water was being pumped into his head. He was tremendously depressed; he became violently angry. Usually the headaches gave him a few days' peace in between, but now he had hardly gotten over one when another one began. He raged around the yard while he still had his sight, kicking, destroying, emptying gasoline and burning it. Then he blacked out.

When he came to, it was dark and the stars were out. He could not move. He lay on the ground in the cool grass, staring upward. The pain in his head had come and gone; looking upward into the cool heaven, the mighty black, he felt a moment of enormous peace. He slept.

He awoke some time later, just before the sun came up. He was still in the grip of a deadly paralysis; he had to fight himself to move, get up. He staggered back to the house, but did not go in. He sat on the porch. He had not shaved in several days; his beard was thick and dark. He lifted his face to the morning, remembering last night's brief moment of peace. He prayed. What he said did not make any sense, but there was no one to hear him. He prayed for a long while, tears streaming down his cheeks. Eventually he stopped.

It's time to fly, he thought. In the red glow of the horizon he could sense men moving about him—pilots! Man your planes! He could see long lines of great black planes outlined against the sky, flames winking on in the exhausts one by one. I'm coming, he said aloud.

He rose and ran out to his plane, hearing the squadron thump by around him in heavy flight boots. He started to sing. He gassed the plane and loaded the gun. Planes roared all around him. He took his place in the line, answering commands over the radio from the tower. When it was his turn, he took off and climbed high up into the sun, along with the rest of the Dawn Patrol. When the squadron broke off, Hem-

minge waved them all good-bye. He settled down alone, the hunter, searching for game in the clear vaulted sky.

Just before he took off that morning, Harry Ball was handed a letter from Pat. One of the boys had gone up to the hospital where she worked, and she had given it to him to deliver. Ball stuffed the letter into his shirt pocket, unopened, and took off. Once out of the traffic pattern, he pulled back on the stick and began the long slow climb to the west, toward the mountains. The letter was heavy in his pocket, but he did not open it. There was a force in him urging him to open the window and let the letter slip out into swift empty air.

Harry Ball was a hard man, and he had not broken with Pat lightly; for two days now he had been making it clear to himself that he would not call her again, he would not see her again. He admitted to himself that he loved her, but that made no difference. He had come very close to kneeling to her, but his pride had held him back. And he knew that because of his pride he had lost her, and he also knew that there was nothing else he could have done. Because there was that same proud thing in Pat which also could not kneel to

him. And what kind of marriage would that make? Ball thought, two people forever fighting each other for control. And after all, Ball thought, I'm thirty years old. Maybe I am not a man for marriage.

So it was all done. Ball looked around at the sky and made an effort to push Pat out of his mind. He flew on over the mountains, high in the morning sun, forcing himself to think about the killer—whom he could begin now to really and truly hate, a startling feeling, a new and murderous feeling. But now Ball had something personal in this, and so scanned the sky intently, searching for any other plane in the dark blue above, forgetting Pat enough to feel a stomach-tightening thrill as he approached a high bank of clouds, thinking that the killer could be waiting just ahead, hanging swift and hidden in among the soft white folds.

But the killer did not come, and abruptly the murderous feeling in Ball died. The sky was wide and white and empty. Ball flew on toward the west with the letter in his pocket, soothed by the drone of his engine, and gradually the fact of the letter in his pocket no longer jarred him. I can handle it, he thought. I can say that I won't call her again and I

won't. And he knew that to be true. Then he took the letter out calmly, coldly, and opened it.

My darling—Ball read—I love you. I have been sitting here all night trying to think of the right words, but all that matters is that I love you. I cannot get over the feeling that I have really and truly lost you, that you will never come back. My darling, I have been terribly wrong. You are all I want in the world. Because you mean so much to me, I have tried to mean something to you, but I had never tried to make anyone love me before and I did not know how. I had to be something special to you, but all I had to give were a few long words and theories I learned in school, and I only wanted to impress you, but more than anything else now I want you, and no theories, no words. I accused you of pride, but it was my own pride that hurt us. Darling, I do not care about pride. I love you. I will love you whether or not you have to kill, whether or not you come back to me. I love you. I can't seem to say that enough. I only wish I had said it before, that it is not too late. But it is all stored up in me, waiting to come out. I will come to you, if you will only call. I love you. Pat.

Ball put the letter down. He

was shaken. Well, he thought. He studied the letter for a long moment, trying to get his mind into focus. She went a long way, he thought. Somebody had to give and she saw that and so she gave. And it was her place to give in, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

In the midst of all his emotion, in the midst of the absolute certainty that he had been right all along, Ball felt a sudden stab of doubt. There was something wrong. He did not know what it was, but it was jarring him. It began to occur to him that he had humbled her, had forced her to come to him. But . . . was that bad? He had needed her to come to him. He did not know why that was so but it was so. He flew on a straight line, thinking about it, trying to discover the thing that still bothered him. He flew on without looking around him, or behind, up at the sun, and in the end the letter nearly cost him his life.

Hemminge came down on him from directly above, out of the sun.

The first Ball knew of it was a pluck, plucking sound at his right wing. He turned and stared stupefied at black holes being stitched with astounding speed across metal. What saved him was instinct. He rammed the left wing hard down, drop-

ping the nose; the bullets meant for his cabin zipped by him through the air. He did not see the other plane coming, but he heard it go by, felt the blast of air from it going by. He dropped far down to the left before pulling up and he had no idea what to do. At the top of his climb he saw the other plane for the first time and stared at it across the open air, losing precious time just to see it, still stunned, and realized that it was a Comanche, a trim new Comanche, blue and silver and glittering in the sun.

It came at him again, nose on and shooting. He swung hard to get away and made a very bad mistake; the Comanche slipped lethally in on his tail and bullets plucked again at the Navion, at the fuselage behind him. He thought of the radio, for a call for help, but there was no time. He needed both hands to fly the plane. He dropped the nose again, gathering speed, rocking wildly back and forth, but the Comanche stayed with him. A bullet smashed through the canopy above him, spattering pieces into his hair. He had an enormous urge to pull up, but once again instinct saved him, telling him that if he pulled up now the Comanche would have him broadside, a lovely shot right into the cockpit. He did the only thing

he had left to do—he let down flaps and hauled back on the throttle. The Navion slowed drastically; the Comanche overshot and brushed him going by, picking up speed.

Ball fought for altitude, but it was impossible to keep the Comanche below him. It was much faster than he was; it gave him no time for the radio. As it came at him again he turned to face it; in desperation he pushed the little button on the dash that fired his gun. The Navion kicked back as the gun went off; he could see the bullets sliding away, missing, but the Comanche veered crazily and Ball heard incredible sounds begin on the radio receiver. It was a long eerie second before Ball understood. The killer was speaking to him. The Comanche had swung off high above him in a confused circle, and was speaking, yelling. In German.

Ball did not know any German, but there was no mistaking the guttural sounds. The killer probably thought he was fighting a real war, against a German ace. But there was no mistaking the other thing, the weird, jittery, unnatural thing in the voice that came down from the other plane. Dribbling, spattering sounds. The killer was shouting at him, and coming down.

Ball had time for a quick cry into the radio—Harry Ball, Mayday, Mayday, near Bear Creek, over Bear Creek—before he had to fight again to keep the Comanche off. He wanted to get one more message across, at least one, that the killer was flying a blue and white Comanche, but bullets came into the canopy again and the killer would not stop talking, and the voice rattled Harry Ball's mind so that he could not speak, but had to go down again in a dive, with the Comanche following. He pulled the same trick, and it worked again, and as the Comanche slid by him Ball raised his nose slowly and the killer was dead ahead, and Harry Ball's hand was on the machine gun button, and time froze as Ball looked down and saw the black helmet in the cockpit, the wild green scarf around the neck, no sound coming over the radio, and Harry Ball didn't shoot.

He pulled up slowly; the Comanche went down and away. Harry Ball felt sick in the pit of his stomach. He felt that he had almost done a dirty thing. It would have been like running over a dog that comes out in front of you on the highway. It struck him now that Pat had known that he would not be capable of doing this thing, just as he had known it but had

been too perverse to admit. And then a new sound came over the radio, a strange deep voice, puzzled, plaintive, in English:

"But why didn't you shoot?"

Harry Ball did not answer. He radioed another quick Mayday, giving the Comanche's serial number. But the Comanche broke in, coming back at him, saying, "You should have shot. You had me fair and square."

But now Ball was in control. The Comanche seemed no longer as fast and sure, and Ball, watching it, sensed that the Comanche was through, and knew at the same time that if he had to kill the Comanche he would do it, as soon as it became really necessary, because regardless of the sickness in this man he had his job to do—but thank God it was not going to be necessary. He said into the radio: "Give up, Comanche. I'll follow you down."

At the moment something caught the corner of his eye. Glancing up quickly, he saw the jets coming, two of them, trailing thin smoke down the sky. Ball said something else into the radio, but the Comanche did not answer. It swung quickly to meet the jets, a lovely little plane gleaming a burning blue in the afternoon sun. It rose up toward them and the jets broke apart, swung out

in a wide pincer, and the Comanche went up between them, climbing.

Ball tried to follow, but the Navion was too slow. The Comanche went on rising, higher, higher, and now again Ball could hear sound on his radio, an even stranger sound, *singing*. The man was singing now, a broken unintelligible song in that eerie unnatural voice, and even the jets were silent, but swung easily around the little plane like huge fast fish around a slow blue minnow. They would follow him wherever he went. It was all done and they knew it, and as Ball watched he saw the Comanche suddenly roll over on its back, and it began to go down.

The man was still singing, humming. Ball listened to him and watched the plane go down, picking up speed, falling faster and faster with the engine wide open, boring straight down, the watching jets sweeping grandly

down after it. For a moment Ball thought that the Comanche was making one last effort to get away, but then the singing stopped and there was a dead silence in the radio, and the Comanche kept going down, moving so fast now that Ball knew he would never pull it out any more, not even if he wanted to. And so the Comanche went straight down, falling out of the sunlight into the rising dark, and the man in the plane began to speak, praying, and he was still praying when the Comanche blew up in the rocks.

The three planes circled above aimlessly, silently. Ball could not think of much to say to the other men. They did not say much to him. After a moment he heard one of the jet pilots give the position of the wreck. He turned off then and started the long flight home.

When he got home, he called Pat and told her that he loved her.

Night Vision

by B. K. Stevens

“**Y**our academic preparation is adequate,” Iphigenia Woodhouse said. She was one of the biggest women I’d ever met—almost six feet tall, broad-shouldered, and lean. Her hair was black and a little bit gray, sort of frizzy but sort of nice, except that it was pulled back from her face too hard, caught at the nape of her neck with a thick blue rubber band. She frowned at my transcript again before flipping back to my resume. “What else have you got? A black belt, a marksmanship certificate—not very relevant, except as indications of a commendable but naive enthusiasm. Our caseload is numbingly nonviolent. The secretarial experience, on the other hand, is extremely relevant. Now. One more thing.” She took off her glasses and stared at me, managing to look both intense and, at the same time, almost bored. “Are you nice, Miss Russo?”

I blinked. “Nice? What do you mean, nice?”

She sighed impatiently. “Nice. You know. Kind. Con-

siderate. Pleasant. That sort of nice. I had to fire my last five assistants for insufficient nice-ness. So. How nice are you?”

Back in Cleveland, I’d paid two hundred dollars for a Power Interviewing seminar. It hadn’t prepared me for this. “I don’t know,” I managed. “I try to be nice.”

“Trying isn’t good enough.” She stuck her glasses back on her face. “This job requires a high, consistent level of nice-ness. Specifically, it requires extreme niceness toward Mother.” She pointed to a mahogany rocking chair outfitted with red cushions. It was set against a bay window, ten feet from Miss Woodhouse’s desk, and next to it was a card table spread with brushes and oils and a large paint-by-number canvas of a lighthouse ringed by stormy seas. “Mother’s upstairs napping now, but normally she sits there. If you get this job, you will always be nice to Mother. You will always treat her, and speak to her, with great respect. If she asks you for any sort of assistance—any sort of assis-

NIGHT VISION



OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EYE, I WATCHED MISS WOODHOUSE. SHE WAS CONCENTRATING ON THE MURDERS—I COULD SEE THE RED INK FLASH BY EVERY TIME SHE FLIPPED A CARD.

tance—you will provide it promptly and cheerfully. You will not chew gum in front of Mother. You will not smoke in front of Mother. You will not use foul language in front of Mother."

"But I never smoke or use foul language," I protested.

She scowled and lit a cigarette. I could see I hadn't won any points by saying I didn't smoke. "I don't give a hot damn about what you 'never' do. My sole concern is with what you do, and do not do, in the presence of Mother. Oh, yes. Clothing. No low-cut blouses, no short skirts, no tight slacks, no nigh heels. Mother doesn't approve."

When I'd come here, I'd felt just about desperate to get this job. I'd run through five cities and all my savings without advancing one inch toward my dream of an apprenticeship at an East Coast detective agency. Annapolis had felt like my last chance, and Woodhouse Investigations had seemed, at first, ideal. Now I wasn't so sure. What sort of private detective kept a well-cushioned mother rocking in the front office, painting by number and imposing a dress code? Would Philip Marlowe have stubbed out his cigarettes and censored his language in deference to Mother? Visions of the Bates Motel

flashed through my mind, and I felt more than a little uneasy.

"Is your mother a detective?" I asked cautiously. "Your partner?"

She took a long, fretful drag on her cigarette. "No. Mother is my most trusted advisor, but she takes no professional interest in investigation work. She is a professor of classical languages and literatures—or rather, she was, until medical developments forced her premature retirement from academia, some sixteen years ago. I might as well tell you now, Miss Russo, that some people would consider my mother somewhat eccentric. I can assure you, however, that she is an acute observer of human events, and that her insights have been of incalculable value to me on countless occasions."

"I see," I said, and began to feel that I really did. I'd done some background research on Iphigenia Woodhouse—one of my Power Interviewing strategies—and had learned that, until sixteen years ago, she'd been a successful, ambitious police detective: a lieutenant by thirty, rising fast, regarded as likely to be the first woman to head the homicide division. Then, abruptly, she'd left the force, broken off an engagement to a fellow detective, and founded Woodhouse Investigations.

tions. Now I thought I understood why. "Is it Alzheimer's?" I asked gently.

She ground out her cigarette, so emphatically that tiny sparks scattered onto her desk blotter and sizzled out harmlessly. "I'll thank you not to be in such a hurry to slap labels onto my mother. No, it is not Alzheimer's. She had a breakdown—the doctors don't know why—and in some respects she has never completely recovered—the doctors can't explain that, either. At the moment, however, our focus is on you, not on the failures of the medical profession. Tell me why you want to become an investigator—or perhaps I can guess. It was the public library, wasn't it? You got bored with being a secretary, you started reading detective novels, and you decided you want to be exactly like Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade."

"Not exactly like them," I said, blushing because she'd come so close to the truth, and because it sounded so silly. "I wouldn't want to sleep around that much, or kill that many people."

At least it made her smile—the first smile I'd seen since the interview started. "You might do after all, Miss Russo. You and Mother might get along just fine. Now. As to

your duties. There'd be a lot of typing and filing and answering the telephone, and you'd also handle most of the legwork. Mother doesn't like me to go out if I can avoid it. Anything requiring tact or real intelligence I would of course handle myself."

It occurred to me that she should maybe consider reassigning the tact work, but I held back. "I'd like to do as much legwork as possible," I said. "I'm eager for field experience."

"Yes, I'm sure you are. Well, let's give you a trial assignment." She opened a desk drawer, rummaged efficiently for a moment, and pulled out a manila folder. "This," she said, tapping the folder with her index finger, "is the simplest of all possible assignments. Mere babysitting. If you can't handle this, you can't handle anything. The client is Christopher Sinclair, director of the Bay Club."

"Is that a country club?" I asked.

"Yes, an extremely exclusive one. Mr. Sinclair has a seventeen-year-old daughter, Jennifer. When Jennifer was three, Mr. Sinclair divorced her mother and quite cheerfully surrendered custody. The mother moved to California, and Mr. Sinclair evidently gave

not another thought to his daughter's existence until about a year ago. Then the mother died in a plane crash, and custody bounced back to Mr. Sinclair."

"And he wasn't exactly delighted to receive it?" I guessed.

She shrugged. "Jennifer is not the sort of daughter best calculated to inspire delight. You know the type—long orange hair with a bright green streak, tight skirts and thick thighs, lots of mascara, lots of acne, late nights, loud music, lousy grades. Plus the usual miniature messes at school. He was appalled, but he was stuck. So he assigned her a back bedroom and was remarkably successful at continuing to ignore her.

"Then, one month ago, she cut her hair and dyed it brown. She started wearing baggy clothes, she stayed home every night, she stopped getting in trouble at school, and her grades shot up. Her father thinks she must be on drugs."

"Drugs?" I echoed incredulously. "Now? Why would he think that now?"

She waved her hand in contempt. "He read a pamphlet. 'Watch for sudden changes in your teenager's behavior. Changes in appearance, in social habits, in academic performance—these can be the warn-

ing signs that all add up to drug abuse.' The standard wisdom on the subject."

"But that doesn't seem likely in this case, does it?"

"Not likely at all. I told Mr. Sinclair that, the first time he came here, but he insisted it must be drugs. My guess is that he's hoping it's drugs, so he'll have an excuse to slap her into one of those residential rehabilitation programs and forget about her for a few months or a few years. Even without the orange hair, she's a dumpy, pimply embarrassment to him."

"He sounds like a horrible person," I said. I couldn't help it.

"He's a charmer," she agreed, "but he pays his bills. At any rate, he wants Jennifer watched." She glanced at the clock. "She gets out of school in half an hour. All you have to do is follow her while she walks home—about six blocks. You don't have to worry too much about being spotted because she never takes her eyes off the sidewalk. And you definitely don't have to worry about anything dramatic happening. I've been following her every day for a month, and she never goes any place racier than the orthodontist's office. Generally, she just walks straight home. Once she gets there, Attila the

Housekeeper takes over, and your job is done. Mr. Sinclair doesn't want a full-scale investigation—too much risk of scandal, he says. So you're not to speak to Jennifer or to attempt to question her friends. Understand?"

"Yes," I said, sorry that the job sounded so easy and unimpressive.

"Good." She started writing rapidly on an index card. "This may be our last day on the case. I called Mr. Sinclair again yesterday and told him he's wasting his money, that if he wants to know what's going on in his daughter's life, he might consider the heretofore untried technique of talking to her. He said he'd think about it."

"I hope he does," I said, and looked up at her slowly. "Why do you think she *did* change so suddenly, Miss Woodhouse?"

"At that age, who knows? Chances are she fell in love with the president of the Young Republicans Club and decided to change her image. Or she got tired of being a junior delinquent, or she got religion, or she just plain grew up. Here." She handed me the index card and a photograph. "The address of the high school, and a picture of her. I took it last month, from my car window. In the most recent photo her father had, she was in diapers."

"Thanks." I put the things into my purse. "You said this was a trial assignment. If I do all right, do I get the job?"

She sat back in her chair and looked at me skeptically. "Well, if you botch something this simple, you definitely don't get the job. I have a policy against hiring hopeless incompetents. If you don't disgrace yourself, you may meet Mother. And then Mother will decide about the job."

If you've ever seen pictures of Annapolis, you've probably seen the city dock, or the state house, or narrow streets crowded with tiny, elegant houses and artsy shops and seafood restaurants. Well, all that quaintness is packed into about two square miles, called the historic district. After that, there's the business district, nice enough but nothing special, and then you cross the bridge, and it's just malls and discount stores and endless stretches of bland, expensive suburbs. Annapolis calls itself a tourist center, but if you come, plan on a short tour. You can visit every spot that has even a shred of interest without using up half a tank of gas.

Woodhouse Investigations occupies the bottom floor of one of those tiny, elegant houses in the historic district, almost

within sight of the dock; Miss Woodhouse and her mother live on the top floor. I was parked on one of those narrow streets, across from the gracefully crumbling Calvert High School, waiting for the students to make their daily escape. I took out the picture of Jennifer Sinclair and studied it again, to make sure I'd recognize her. She looked so drab and sad—short, chunky, mud-brown hair chopped off in a thick fringe, a black skirt that drooped several inches below her knees, a bulky gray sweater. She was hunched over the stack of books she carried, her eyes riveted on the ground. I had no way of knowing, of course, but I'd guess she had looked better with the mascara and the orange hair—no prettier, maybe, but cheerfulness. I propped the picture up on my dashboard, and wondered why any seventeen-year-old would do this to herself.

I heard the hollow echo of a bell, and the school began to empty. It wasn't hard to spot Jennifer. She was one of the last ones out, hanging back, not talking to anybody. She looked exactly as she did in the picture—the graveyard outfit, the back stooped, the head down, the books hugged to her chest like a shield, or like a security blanket. When she reached the

sidewalk, her head popped up for a quick look in all directions, and then it snapped down again and she took off down the block, plowing through the ambling, laughing crowd of students like a determined, slightly demented bulldozer. I eased into the flow of cars, anonymous among all the mothers and girlfriends and boyfriends converging on the school to pick up passengers. Even if Jennifer had been looking for me—and she wasn't looking for me, she was studying the sidewalk—she probably wouldn't have spotted me. This job was an obvious cinch.

At the corner, though, she turned left, and that made me perk up. Miss Woodhouse had said Jennifer always turned right here. Chances were, she was just making a detour to return an overdue library book or grab a quick midafternoon pizza. Then again, maybe she was finally on her way to make a drug buy. Maybe this assignment would turn into a chance to prove myself after all. I kept my eyes tight on her as she took one unpredictable turn after another, straight into the heart of the historic district. She was walking faster, she never looked up once, she tunneled down Duke of Gloucester Street, and then suddenly, be-

fore I realized what was happening, she shot up a cobblestone walkway and disappeared into St. Michael's Church.

A church. Nothing Miss Woodhouse had said had prepared me for a church. Still, what could be more innocent? And this kid had Troubled Teen written all over her. Probably she was meeting sweet old Father Somebody for a counseling session. I searched frantically for a parking space, settled for one in a loading zone half a block away, and tried to figure out my next move. Should I follow her like a ninny and lose the chance to see sweet old Father Somebody pass her a dime bag? What would Travis McGee do? I chewed my lip, and tugged at my hair, and couldn't decide.

At least I was bright enough to keep an eye on the rear view mirror, so I saw the silver Cadillac pull into a handicapped spot right in front of the church, saw the man climb out, scan the street quickly, and start up the cobblestone path. He didn't look handicapped, and he didn't look like sweet old Father Somebody. He looked like a pimp. He was maybe forty, short and wiry, lavender suit, black shirt, white tie, blond hair slicked back tight across his skull, de-

signer sunglasses. Oh, my God, I thought. White slavery, and the world's least suspicious-looking pickup spot. I jumped out of my car and raced down the street to rescue Jennifer.

He made it into the church maybe a minute before I did. I tried to fling open the oversized oak door, found it too heavy to be flung, struggled to pull it back, and scrambled inside. The adjustment from sunshine to semidarkness cost me another few moments. I was at the back of the sanctuary, and Jennifer was in a front pew, already struggling with the man in the lavender suit. He had her by the left arm, he was pulling her toward the aisle, he had something in his right hand. Her right hand was reaching for something inside her baggy sweater.

All this registered in about a second. Then there was a shot—just one, very loud. He lurched back a few inches, his hand still on her arm, his face stretched with astonishment. He fell, and she screamed.

I didn't think at all. I just felt sick. "Oh, no!" I cried. "Jennifer!"

Her head jerked back in shock—obviously, she hadn't noticed me before. But she noticed me then. I'd never seen such pure terror in a human face.

She screamed again, and then she must have stepped over the body, or jumped over the body. Within seconds, she was charging up the aisle at me, howling—a deep, wild, hopeless howl. Whatever happened next, it was a disgrace to all my years at Mr. Lee's Aerobic Kung Fu Studio. I don't think I even went into a stance. She ran straight at me, she smacked the side of my head with her gun, and then I think she must have just run over me. I have a vague memory of falling down, of hitting my head on the carefully preserved eighteenth century stone floor, and of feeling stupid.

“Your first name is Harriet, isn't it?"

I opened my eyes slowly. I was lying in a crisp, narrow bed, and for a second I thought the woman sitting next to me was Iphigenia Woodhouse. The gray eyes were right, and the thick, almost archless eyebrows, and the large-lean frame, and the your-opinion-do n't-matter-much voice. But this woman's hair was white, gathered into a fat, neat braid that descended almost to her waist, and her face was saggy and spotted. And would Iphigenia Woodhouse be holding an eight-inch

square metal loom on her lap, or be busily engaged in weaving a pink and green potholder?

"My daughter told me all about you," the woman said, frowning as she threaded a polyester loop through the haphazard maze she'd constructed. "She didn't want me to come along—she never wants to take me anywhere. But I wasn't about to let her go to a hospital without me. It would be such a perfect chance for her, wouldn't it, to talk to the doctors and make her plans. She wants to put me in an asylum, you know. She wants them to lock me away and feed me on bread and water, and then she can run straight to That Man and stay out as late as she likes and eat greasy food and smoke cigarettes. Well, I was too quick for her. 'You take me to that hospital with you, Iphigenia,' I said, 'or it's no allowance for the rest of the month.' And, as you might imagine, she didn't have much to say to *that*."

I'm not usually a lucky person. But on this one occasion I said the perfect word, and it must have been luck that led me to it—I certainly wasn't thinking very clearly, and even at my clearest I wouldn't have been sharp enough to know what she most wanted to hear.

"Are you Professor Woodhouse?" I asked.

Groggy as I was, I could see the thrill shoot through her when she heard the word "professor." The shoulders straightened, the old gray eyes danced, and the thick braid twitched with pleasure.

"Why, yes, I am," she said. "I am Professor Woodhouse. And you are Harriet Russo—poor, sweet Harriet, who's had such a nasty bump on the head. Iphigenia said some very nasty things when she heard about it—she's always been a nasty girl, you know—but don't worry. I'll make her be nice to you."

She walked to the door and looked down the hall. "Iphigenia," she called. "Put out that smelly, awful cigarette and come here this minute. Little Harriet's awake now." She squeezed my hand and winked at me before sitting down again.

Iphigenia Woodhouse walked into the room, stood at the foot of my bed, crossed her arms across her chest, and scowled. The galloping pain in my head got a lot worse.

"Well," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Not too bad," I lied. "What happened?"

She scowled again. "You may well ask. Let's review your progress on your first case, shall we? You were given the

difficult assignment of following a teenage girl as she walked home from school. During the seven or eight minutes you had her under your surveillance, she killed a man in a church, assaulted you, fired three wild shots at a policeman who tried to stop her as she ran down the street, and disappeared. Thanks to you, I had to call my client and tell him that his daughter, who had never before been convicted of anything more serious than smoking in the girls' room, is now a fugitive from justice, wanted for murder and a fistful of other felonies. How would you rate your performance, Miss Russo?"

Professor Woodhouse reached for her potholder loom. "Don't you dare blame poor, sweet Harriet, you nasty girl," she said severely. "This entire fiasco is your fault. You shouldn't have given her such a dangerous assignment on her very first day."

Iphigenia Woodhouse's eyebrows popped up, and you could see her scrambling to adjust to the fact that I had become, in her mother's eyes, "poor, sweet Harriet." When she spoke again, her voice was so much gentler and more tentative that you'd have thought it was a different person. "I'm very sorry, Mother," she said. "I didn't

mean to upset you. And you're right; I shouldn't have given Miss Russo the assignment. But I didn't think it would be dangerous. Jennifer didn't seem at all violent, or—"

"She'd smoked in the girls' room," Professor Woodhouse cut in. "That should have told you what sort of person she is. It's just the sort of mess you always used to get into yourself, you nasty girl. What were you thinking of, exposing dear little Harriet to someone who had smoked in the girls' room?"

Iphigenia Woodhouse sank into a chair. "Yes, she'd smoked in the girls' room," she said wearily. "And now she's killed a man."

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other," Professor Woodhouse said, continuing placidly with her weaving. "If anything, she's taken a step up. There's absolutely no legitimate excuse for indulging in such a filthy, unhealthful habit, especially not on school property. There are, on the other hand, any number of legitimate reasons for killing a man."

Iphigenia Woodhouse lifted her head slowly, a look of wonder transforming her face. "You're absolutely right, Mother," she said.

"He *did* seem to be attacking her," I offered cautiously. "He was dragging on her arm, and

she looked awful scared."

"You see?" Professor Woodhouse demanded. "When I finish this potholder, dear little Harriet, I will give it to you. Indeed, I will make you a set of three matching potholders, and that will be very nice. Iphigenia, have the police identified the nasty man who was shot in the church?"

"Edward Fox," Miss Woodhouse said glumly. "A fence, from Baltimore. The police figure Jennifer was planning to sell him something she'd stolen from her father, to get money for drugs. Then something went wrong, and she shot him—with a gun also, presumably, stolen from her father."

"The police seem to be making a number of unwarranted assumptions," Professor Woodhouse observed. "I'm sorry to see you guilty of the same mistake, Iphigenia. Thank goodness you have sweet little Harriet with you now, to keep you from making similar mistakes in the future. Now, you get some good rest tonight, little Harriet, and in the morning you can go with Iphigenia when she offers her apologies to Mr. Sinclair."

Miss Woodhouse nodded meekly, and it was settled. Impossible as it seemed, I apparently still had a chance at this job.

I'd figured Mr. Sinclair would stay home the next day, to pace by the phone and hope for news about his daughter. But no, he went to work. We found him in the Bay Club's restaurant, a big, sunshiny room with huge picture windows overlooking a quiet stretch of the Severn River. There were round tables with pastel linen tablecloths, and pale wooden chairs with slender backs, and in the middle of each table there was a bunch of flowers—real flowers, but so bright and glossy and flawless you'd have sworn they were fake. It was elegant. Mr. Sinclair was elegant, too, slim and silver-haired and dressed just so. I sure wouldn't have picked him as Jennifer's father. He was standing near the hostess's station, talking to a very stylish, very thin, very blonde woman who looked maybe thirty from across the room, maybe forty-five close up. She was flipping through some pages attached to a clipboard, taking notes once in a while and nodding a lot.

"Lillian Dexter complained about the salmon again," he was saying. "She swears it was overdone. Mention it to Gunther, will you? And Bill Radford says he's bored with our salad dressings, wants us to try something lemony. I sup-

pose we should humor him. And—oh." He frowned briefly when he noticed us. "Miss Woodhouse. I'm surprised to see you here, I must say. This is my restaurant manager, Nancy Bracken." He tilted his head, ever so slightly, in my direction. "And this, I take it, is the incompetent young person who was supposed to keep my daughter out of trouble yesterday."

I felt like hiding behind Miss Woodhouse's skirt, but I stood my ground. The corners of her mouth tightened. "It wasn't her fault, Mr. Sinclair. I take full responsibility for what happened."

"Yes, I rather think you should," he said mildly, taking the clipboard and initialing something. "As you'll recall, I told you that Jennifer must be on drugs. As I recall, you told me that my fears were groundless. I paid you to get me some reliable information, and all you ever gave me was platitudes about learning to trust in and communicate with my daughter. Well, trust in Jennifer would have been a trifle misplaced, wouldn't it?" He put the clipboard down and looked at Miss Woodhouse directly. "As to communicating with her, at your urging, I tried that, yesterday morning. The results were not quite as heartwarm-

ing as you had predicted. She went into hysterics, ran from the house, and, before the end of the day, committed murder. Now, how much do I owe you for your professional services and advice?"

You could see how much she hated that, but she took it without so much as a scowl. "I'd like to help, Mr. Sinclair. I'd like to try to find Jennifer before she gets into more trouble. Could you tell me about your conversation yesterday, about why she got so upset? Perhaps that would tell me where to start."

He gave her a sideways glance. "I certainly didn't say anything that could inspire a murder. I did just as you suggested—I complimented her on the more positive aspects of the changes she's made in the last month, and I offered her the opportunity to become more a part of my life. I said, 'Jennifer, since you are apparently no longer intent on looking like a sideshow freak, perhaps you'd like to work toward dressing in a genuinely presentable way. I spoke to Miss Bracken last night, and she has agreed to take you to a beauty salon and a clothing store tomorrow. If the results are tolerable, you may come to the club for a soft drink the following afternoon; and if you behave in a reasonably civilized manner, perhaps

someday you may stay for dinner.' Now, why should she be upset by a generous offer such as that?"

I imagined how I would have felt, and thought Jennifer had shown a lot of restraint by shooting only one person that day.

But Nancy Bracken put a hand on his arm, her icy blue eyes thawing a degree or two. "I'm so very sorry Jennifer didn't accept, Chris. I would have been delighted to help, and I was looking forward to meeting her."

He patted her hand but didn't bother to look at her. "Thank you, Nancy. Yes, I'd hoped you could be a positive influence on her, but clearly she was already beyond help. Only a fool could fail to perceive that." He looked at us. "However, Miss Woodhouse, I believe in giving people second chances. So far, my friends in the media have done their best for me, but the publicity is bound to become intolerable if Jennifer remains a fugitive much longer. If you can locate her and turn her over to the police, if you can end this awkward business quickly and quietly, I will pay you."

This time, she did scowl. "I will not accept payment. I will continue to work on this case, but only because I feel sorry for

Jennifer and responsible for what happened to her."

She turned away from him sharply and stalked out, and I did my best to stalk after her with similar style. I was feeling pretty rotten, though, and I think maybe I shuffled. And then, once we got outside the club, we had to stop stalking and idle under the awning while the parking lot attendant ambled to get Miss Woodhouse's car. He had a Schwarzenegger build and curly blond hair and smoky blue eyes and dimples, and I thought he was awful cute. Miss Woodhouse, however, was not impressed.

"This is ludicrous," she fumed. "This is the very definition of decadence. People come here, supposedly, to golf and swim and play tennis, to reap the benefits of fresh air and exercise. But they can't walk the length of a medium-sized parking lot. Oh, no. That would exhaust them. So they must stand about uselessly while some uniformed Adonis parks and fetches their cars. Well, I suppose the society matrons can work up a sweat just fantasizing about the fact that he's caressed their keys."

"I guess," I said, and cleared my throat. "Miss Woodhouse, it was real nice of you to take the blame in there, but I hope you

don't really feel responsible. It was all my fault. I should have—"

"No. You're new at this, and I told you it was a routine assignment. I was wrong about that, wrong about everything. I thought Sinclair's drug theory was idiotic, so I assumed that there was no real reason to worry about Jennifer, that she wasn't in trouble of any sort. A stupid, stupid mistake. All those changes in her appearance and behavior—maybe they weren't the warning signs of drug abuse, but they were sure as hell the warning signs of something, and I just shrugged them off."

Her car pulled up in front of us then, and the parking lot attendant eased himself out. I hadn't paid strict attention in my high school mythology class, but I remembered enough to know that Adonis was a pretty good name for him.

He walked over to us, real slow, and grinned, and pressed Miss Woodhouse's keys into her hand. Just before he released them, he gave her a long, slow, head-to-toe look, letting his gaze wrap itself all around her. Then he grinned again, like he'd just had his thrill for the week, and gave me the same treatment.

It was all an act, I knew, a

hokey, obvious act he probably used on all the ladies, but it pretty nearly took my breath away. Miss Woodhouse glared and didn't tip him.

We got into the car. "Do you think Jennifer was stealing things," I asked, "since the man she shot was a fence? You think she was messed up in a gang, a robbery ring, something like that?"

"Possibly. The one thing I'm sure of—and I should have realized it long ago—is that she was scared. I should have seen it in the way she walked, the way she carried herself. And the most obvious explanation for the hair and the clothes is that she didn't want to be recognized. Hiding out at home fits in with that theory, too, and so does bringing a gun into a church. She must have been afraid that she might have to defend herself."

"Do you think she might have been scared of something connected to her father's club?" I suggested tentatively. "After all, she got hysterical when he invited her to go there."

Iphigenia Woodhouse lifted an eyebrow and nodded slowly. "A surprisingly sensible suggestion, Miss Russo. You may be correct. Now, we must try to move beyond guesswork, toward certainty. So I will make some telephone calls and con-

sult some sources, and you will go to the library."

"The library?" I felt disappointed. I'd been hoping she'd let me watch her grill some suspects.

"That's right." She pulled up in front of a long, low concrete building. "Jennifer cut off her hair and started dressing like a professional frump on Saturday, March ninth. Whatever scared her into making those changes, chances are it was violent, chances are it was illegal, and chances are it made the newspapers. See if you can find some possibilities. Check for a few days before the ninth, a few days after. Check the Baltimore papers as well as the Annapolis one. Check for murders, robberies, assaults, anything lively. Make a list. Then take a nap—Mother's very concerned about that bump on your head—and come to the house for dinner. Understand?"

"Understood," I said, wondering if the second assignment meant that I had the job, or at least a chance to redeem myself. But I didn't ask. It would be better, I thought, to wait until I'd impressed her by putting together the longest, goriest list I could manage. And it would definitely be better to wait until her mother was around.

* * *

The Woodhouses' kitchen is small and old fashioned and efficient—the walls and cupboards and all the appliances white, crisp gingham curtains, utensils hanging in a symmetrical pattern on a pegboard, clear counters, no clutter. Next to the refrigerator, there's a large oil painting in a scrolled gilt frame. It's a portrait of Winnie-the-Pooh—the Disney character—just the face, a little smudged here and there, a little shaky, and you can tell it's paint-by-number. Still, it's very bright and colorful, and she had mostly stayed inside the lines. I glanced over at Professor Woodhouse, who was standing by the sink slicing onions. "What a nice painting," I said. "Is it your work, professor?"

She looked up and smiled. "Why, yes. How clever of you to guess. It does cheer the room up a bit, doesn't it? I like to have a smiling face around—and with Iphigenia so glum and gloomy, I'm not likely to see smiles unless I paint them. Iphigenia, I shall need two more onions for this salad."

From what I could see, the salad consisted almost entirely of onions, but Miss Woodhouse fetched two more without commenting. Then she took a roast and baked potatoes from the

oven, her mother added croutons and green olives to the salad, and we all walked into the dining room. It's a cool, lovely room, vaguely nautical but not cutesy, all dark woods and blue fabrics. The centerpiece is a big green Styrofoam cube dotted with colored pipe cleaners twisted into flower shapes and studded with sequins. I didn't waste much time wondering who the artist was.

"Would you mind if we discuss business at dinner, Mother?" Miss Woodhouse asked as soon as we were seated. "Miss Russo and I have—"

"Call her Harriet," the professor cut in. "Why must you be so cold and formal, Iphigenia? It's no wonder you don't have any friends. And no, I don't mind if you discuss business—not that it would make any difference if I did mind, since in either case you'd do exactly as you please, just as you always do, you nasty girl. And if I so much as murmur in protest, it's off to the asylum with me, and you'll run to That Man. No, don't bother denying it. You don't fool me, and you don't fool Harriet." She turned to me, crinkling her nose and smiling sweetly. "Now, little Harriet. Mean old Iphigenia made you work this afternoon, didn't she? She sent you to the library,

even though I *told* her you needed to nap. Well, I'm sure you discovered some very exciting things. Tell us all about them. And have some salad."

She filled my plate with onions and croutons and olives, and I smiled, reaching for my purse and taking out a thick stack of index cards. "Thank you. Yes, I went to the library—I was very happy to go—and I looked through all the Annapolis, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., papers for the last six weeks. I think I caught all the significant crimes. The murders are in red ink, and assaults in blue, the robberies in black. And one burglary, in green. It's not violent, but I think it's interesting."

I handed Miss Woodhouse the cards, and I could see she was impressed—by the amount of work I'd done, if not by the color coding. I'd put the green burglary card on the top of the stack, and she skimmed it and frowned. "March 12: Mr. and Mrs. William Radford return from a trip to the Bahamas to find their Annapolis home stripped of jewelry, paintings, appliances." Well, it's fine that you took notes on this, Miss Russo—Harriet—but I don't see why you consider it interesting."

"Because the Radfords be-

long to the Bay Club," I said eagerly. "Remember? This morning Mr. Sinclair was telling his restaurant manager that Bill Radford had complained about the salad dressings. So I called the Bay Club, just to make sure, and it's the same William Radford. And I thought maybe, if Jennifer was messed up with that fence she killed, she could have been keeping track of when club members were out of town, and passing the names on to him, and then they'd rip off the houses, and he'd fence what they stole. This burglary wasn't discovered until March twelfth, but it could have happened earlier, and maybe something went wrong."

Miss Woodhouse nodded slowly. "And maybe Jennifer got scared, and maybe that's why she changed her appearance on March ninth. Very intriguing."

"Much better than intriguing." Professor Woodhouse said, beaming. "It's ingenious. I'd like to see you come up with something half so clever, Iphigenia. Little Harriet has done a fine job. She has earned more salad." She piled another helping onto my plate.

Miss Woodhouse's mouth twitched in a brief, tiny grin. "Harriet's earned all the salad she wants, and then some.

Now, let's see the murders. Two in Annapolis, both domestic—probably not what we're looking for. Baltimore had thirteen—rather a slow six weeks for Baltimore. And forty-nine in D.C. Why did you check the D.C. papers?"

"I wanted to be thorough. And since it's barely an hour away, I thought Jennifer might have—well, I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. You've shown commendable initiative." She set to work, skimming the cards and sorting them into piles. "Please excuse me while I glance through these. Enjoy your dinner."

The roast was so tender you hardly needed teeth to chew it, the potatoes were firm and rich, and the salad was interesting. Professor Woodhouse chattered steadily as I ate, telling me long, confusing stories about her family, mostly about how her Uncle Ed had killed his father and married his mother, and later, I think, his daughter got buried alive. It was pretty gruesome stuff, but I'd read a little Sophocles in my mythology class, and I figured maybe Professor Woodhouse had just mixed up some stuff she'd lived and some stuff she used to teach. So I didn't let it bother me too much. I just ate, and smiled, and nodded, and out of

the corner of my eye, I watched Miss Woodhouse. She was concentrating on the murders—I could see the red ink flash by every time she flipped a card—and she was making a big stack, a small stack, and a tiny stack.

Finally, she stopped sorting. She picked up the top card from the tiny stack and snapped it in the air. "This murder interests me most. The victim was Clayton Davis, age seventeen, black, high-school senior, resident of Fairfax, Virginia. Shot twice in the back, body found in a Dumpster in D.C. at seven A.M. on Saturday, March ninth."

"Exactly one month ago yesterday," Professor Woodhouse observed, spreading mustard on her potato.

"That's right, Mother—you're exactly right, of course." She flashed me an I-told-you-so glance, as if I'd doubted her mother's intelligence and now they'd proved me wrong. "It exactly coincides with the change in Jennifer's appearance, too. And the one thing I've been able to discover about the night before she changed is that she went to a party with some friends and left, about midnight, with a black boy nobody had seen before." She ran a squared, unpolished fingernail under the bright red lines of my

notes. "Now, the police assumed the shooting was drug-related—what else would they assume?—but apparently there's no evidence that he was ever involved with drugs. The dumpster interests me, too. Presumably, he wasn't shot there; presumably, the body was moved. He could have been shot anywhere."

"Like at the Radford house?" I suggested. "Maybe he helped her burglarize it, and then there was a quarrel, and the fence shot him, and then they dumped the body in a place that nobody would associate with the burglary, a place where the police would assume it was just another drug-related shooting."

"Possibly." Miss Woodhouse frowned. "It doesn't quite fit the facts, but we're getting closer. I'll call some friends on the D.C. police force and see if they've learned anything more about the shooting."

Professor Woodhouse sighed impatiently as she served me more salad. "That's all well and good, but hadn't you better find that girl? She must be scared to death. Every time I turn on the radio, some policeman or prosecutor is talking about how much trouble she's in, and how much worse it will be if she doesn't give herself up. Dismal old things! As if threats would

make that poor, frightened girl give herself up."

"That's true, Mother. But really, what else can they say?"

"They can promise her something nice," Professor Woodhouse shot back. "That's what you should do, Iphigenia. Go on the radio yourself, and say you'll give her something nice if she calls you. A pony, for example—that would be splendid. All girls like ponies. And I don't think she can be such a *very* bad girl, even if she *did* smoke in the girls' room. She went to church yesterday, after all."

"She probably went there to meet the fence," Miss Woodhouse pointed out, reaching for the butter.

Her mother slapped her hand. "Did it ever occur to you that perhaps she went there to pray? Why must you always think the worst of people, you nasty girl? Now, you send that poor thing a message. Promise to give her something nice if she calls you. Do as I say, Iphigenia, and do it now."

Miss Woodhouse froze, looking sort of stunned and dismayed, like she wanted to obey her mother but didn't know how she could manage it this time. Then she nodded slowly, and got up, and walked into the den. Ten minutes later, she came back, carrying a legal pad.

"I've written a message for her, Mother," she said, all soft and meek. "I'd like to put it in the newspaper, if that's all right, rather than on the radio. If Jennifer's still in Annapolis—and she probably doesn't have either the money or the courage to run—she may be reading the paper for news about her case. And if she's desperately searching for a way out of town, she might check the classifieds, and—well." She grimaced. "It's a long shot, but if she *does* see the ad, I think it would appeal to her."

She handed me the pad. "This ad should appeal to her, all right," I said, reading through it quickly. "But it should also appeal to every other teenager in the county. You'll get thousands of calls."

"That's why I'd like to put your telephone number in the ad," she said evenly. "I'd like you to screen all the calls and get in touch with me if you hear from any possible Jennifers. Can you manage that?"

"Of course she can!" Professor Woodhouse cried. She absolutely shimmered with delight. "That's the first good idea you've had in months. Dear little Harriet will find poor little Jennifer, and clear this whole unpleasant business up. And then, if you're very good, Iphigenia, you may invite them

both over for a lovely slumber party. I will make you hot chocolate, and pop you some popcorn. Won't that be nice?"

"Very nice," Miss Woodhouse said. "Thank you so much, Mother." She turned to me, and I swear her eyes were all teary. "Will you take the calls?"

How could I say no?

Miss Woodhouse pulled some strings, and our ad made the next day's newspaper. By late afternoon, my phone number had to be the most popular seven digit sequence in history: the moment I set the receiver down, the phone shrilled again, and I had to go back into my act. After three solid hours of this, I'd gotten pretty good at eliminating callers quickly, but I still hadn't found any possible Jennifers. And I was exhausted. I left the phone off the hook, went into the bathroom to splash cold water on my face, did thirty situps, poured myself a stiff Diet Coke, sighed, and put the receiver back in place.

Of course the phone rang instantly. I shoved two fresh sticks of gum into my mouth. "Rockbuster Productions," I drawled. "The bands we book really cook. Whaddaya want?"

"I—um, well, hi." Female voice, definitely young, defi-

nitely nervous, maybe scared. "I'm, um, well, I'm calling about your ad. In the *Capital*, you know? About the job. Could you, um, well, tell me more about the job?"

So far, very promising. I snapped my gum. "It's just like the ad says, kid. The Hot Rivets are leaving for a Midwest tour, and they're looking for a roadie. A roadie, not a groupie. So if it's sex, drugs, and rock and roll you want, forget it."

"No sex," she said anxiously. "No drugs. Just rock and roll. That is, all I want is a job. But I love rock and roll, and even though I've never heard of the Hot Rivets, I—"

"Never heard of them?" I demanded incredulously. I was wearing jeans and my Paul Simon T-shirt, and I purposely hadn't washed my hair that morning, so it was easy for me to get into the part. "Don't you read *Rolling Stone*? The boys got a fabulous review, totally fabulous—said they bring new meaning to the term heavy metal techno-funk. And they just cut their second album, and we've got first-class gigs set every five inches, solid, from Columbus to Sioux Falls to Tucson. And you never heard of them?"

"Well, I missed the last issue of *Rolling Stone*," she said apologetically. "But they sound

great. I was wondering—well, um, the ad said it's an immediate opening. How soon is the band leaving?"

"Day after tomorrow, kid. Could you swing that?"

"Yes, I could," she said. "The sooner, the better. Does the—um, well, the band travels on its own bus, doesn't it? Not on a public bus? Is it leaving from the depot?"

Sort of a strange question—except from someone who figured the cops must be staking the depot out, watching for her. I sat up straighter. "Nah, they're leaving from the bass player's house, out on Riva Road. Now, there's no experience required, like the ad says, but you oughta know it's heavy work. Setting equipment up, lugging instruments around, like that. It ain't no job for Miss Junior Petite. So if you're some Skinny Minnie—"

"I'm not," she said eagerly. "I'm not skinny at all. I'm sort of heavy. And I'm very strong, and I'll work very, very hard."

"That's what it takes, kid—that, and a realistic attitude. This tour ain't going to make you rich and famous, you know."

"Fine with me," she said, a little bleakly. "I've been rich, and it stinks. And famous is the last thing I need. The ad said room and board and modest

wages, and that's plenty for me."

"Yeah, well, the wages are pretty damn modest," I said, and cringed. I really don't like saying that word. "One more thing. We don't provide transportation back. The tour ends in Tucson, and that's where we leave you. You gotta find your own way home."

"I won't want to come home." The voice was utterly flat now. "Tucson sounds fine. It sounds great."

You sound great, I thought. I yawned to conceal my excitement. "Okay, then. Maybe you'll do. I'll check with the road manager, and if he's interested, I'll call you back to set up an interview. You can bring your parents along—they'll probably want to check us out, make sure we're legit."

There was a pause. "No, thank you. I mean, that isn't necessary. I'm on my own. I'm twenty-one—I don't look it, but I am. And my mother's dead, and my father—well, he's in prison. Sex crimes, you know? Can I just come to the interview alone?"

"Fine with me." It was hard not to bounce in my chair. This had to be Jennifer. Every other caller had been at least a little wary, had wanted to bring half a dozen relatives to the interview. "Give me your name and

number, kid. Maybe I'll get back to you."

She hesitated for just an instant. "My name is Joan," she said. "Joan Mellencamp. My number is 555-9236, and I really hope you'll call."

"If you're lucky," I said and slapped the receiver down and immediately dialed Miss Woodhouse's number.

At eleven thirty the next morning, I was back at the Bay Club. The parking lot Adonis took my keys, gave me one of his slow, head-to-toe leers, and eased himself into my car with fluid grace. He grinned at me again as he pulled away. Miss Woodhouse was right. It's ludicrous and decadent to have valet parking at a country club. The man did have style, though.

I sighed away his spell and headed straight for the restaurant. Nancy Bracken was tiptoeing about the room, aiming sly peeks and smiles at the scattered early lunchers, occasionally hovering by a table long enough to drop a murmur or two. She stiffened up considerably when she saw me.

"It's Miss Russo, isn't it?" she said. "Are you looking for Mr. Sinclair? I'm so sorry. He's downtown, at the Rotary Club luncheon. Could I help you?"

"Lord, I sure hope so." Fretfully, I pushed my hair back from my forehead. "I'm in a real jam, Miss Bracken. It's just my first week on the job—I'm not even sure I *have* the job yet—and I just don't know what to do. Miss Woodhouse is in D.C. working on a real important case, and she told me to meet her there by noon, and already I'm not going to make it, but I don't see how I can leave town." I glanced nervously around the room and lowered my voice. "I found Jennifer."

She did a sharp doubletake, then recovered quickly and led me to an empty corner of the room. "That's wonderful. What did she say?"

"Nothing that makes any sense. She's a mess—hysterical, paranoid, incoherent." I lifted my hands helplessly. "She'd been hiding out in the basement of a friend's house. I won't go into all the details of how I found her, but when she saw me, she freaked. She wouldn't tell me anything—just went on and on about how people are after her, people want to kill her, that kind of garbage. I managed to get her in my car and take her to Miss Woodhouse's place, and then I slipped her a few sedatives. She's out cold now—I don't think she's slept in days,

so she'll be all right for a while. But what should I do? I can't reach Miss Woodhouse, and I don't want to call the cops until Jennifer sees her father and talks to a lawyer."

"That's very wise." Her eyes got all squinty, and you could tell she was thinking it over. "So she's at Miss Woodhouse's. Alone?"

I shrugged. "Well, Professor Woodhouse is there—that's Miss Woodhouse's mother. But to tell you the truth, Professor Woodhouse is—well, I don't want to say she's senile, but she's very confused, you know? Thank goodness Miss Woodhouse gave me a complete set of keys to her house. There's a little attic bedroom, with a door that locks from the outside, so I put Jennifer there and locked her in. Maybe that sounds awful, but it seemed safest."

"I think you did exactly the right thing." She paused, and you could see the gears churning again. "Mr. Sinclair should know about this. I'll try to phone him. No, you wait here. I'll be right back."

She was gone maybe three minutes, and she looked all brisk and confident when she returned. "I couldn't reach him, but I'll keep trying. I don't see any reason why you can't leave for D.C. now."

She had some questions

about Jennifer's state of mind and all, and kept me talking for another ten minutes. Then she seemed satisfied, and we shook hands, and I left. Adonis brought me my car, practically singeing me with his sultriest leer as he handed me my keys.

One forty-five in the afternoon. I lay on my side in the narrow bed, my face to the wall, the quilt pulled up snugly around my shoulders and neck. It was very quiet. I couldn't see her, of course, but in my mind I had a clear image of the ancient, hunched figure dozing in the rocking chair next to the bed, the thick glasses sliding down her nose, the afghan nearly enveloping her, the fat braid descending down her back.

I heard the door pushed open cautiously, a male voice, very soft. "Not locked," it said. Then a pause. "Damn. The old broad's in there."

The female voice was also soft, but unhesitating, ice-firm. "So we do them both. Old ladies fall all the time—this one can break her neck on the stairs. But first the kid gets her accidental overdose. Now, Frank. Nice and quiet and quick."

I lay absolutely still. Another second, two seconds, three, four. Then the quick rush of cold air as the quilt was pulled

back from my shoulders.

One more second, and suddenly the room filled with noise and motion—a scream, a thud, a startled obscenity, grunts, a shouted order, feet pounding up the stairs, a soft crash as the bed collided with the wall. I flipped onto my other side in time to see Adonis hit the floor. Already Miss Woodhouse was on top of him, her afghan thrown aside, her braid swinging wildly as she struggled to pin down his arm, to dislodge the thing grasped in his fist. I looked toward the door and saw Nancy Bracken, shrieking, kicking wildly at the police detective who was holding her. Two other policemen crowded into the room, trying to help, making futile grabs at her.

Miss Woodhouse was still on the floor, wrestling with Adonis. She knocked the hypodermic needle from his grip, but he got a hand free and punched her, hard, in the face.

"I'll help you, Miss Woodhouse!" I cried and started to leap up and got tangled in the quilt and landed on the floor, face down and useless.

It didn't really matter. There was a tremendous bellow of rage, and suddenly the police detective had shoved Nancy Bracken aside and bounded across the room. He grabbed Adonis by the shoulders,

yanked him to his feet, and threw him across the room. It's a pretty sturdy house, but I swear it shook when Adonis hit the wall. He just sort of melted then, oozing slowly to the floor and grinning foolishly. Even semiconscious, he looked good.

By now the other two policemen had succeeded in handcuffing the still-kicking, still-cursing Nancy Bracken. Miss Woodhouse was sitting cross-legged on the floor, rubbing her chin in an absentminded way, looking quite contented. She cast a reproachful, vaguely affectionate look at the police detective, who was easing the wobbly Adonis to his feet.

"You didn't have to do that," she said. "I could have handled him."

The police detective grinned at her. "I believe you could have, Jeannie," he said.

Instantly, I knew that he must be That Man, the long ago abandoned detective fiancé. Before I could recover from that jolt, there was another one—a clear, strong voice from downstairs, so loud it seemed to slice through the floor.

"Let go of me, young ruffian!" Professor Woodhouse shouted. "This is my house, and I'll go where I'll please! No, don't tell me it's not safe yet—I'll decide when it's safe. Don't you understand? My dear little Iphi-

genia's up there, and she may need me. Out of my way, you nasty boy!"

We heard a thud and a startled moan as some unfortunate young policeman was knocked aside, and then the house shuddered again as Professor Woodhouse thundered up the stairs.

"Don't be afraid, little Iphigenia!" she cried. "Mummy's coming!"

Miss Woodhouse jumped to her feet. "I'm fine, Mother," she called. "I'll be right with you." She looked at the police detective one more time, and I thought I saw a shadow of regret in her smile, but when she turned to me, her eyes blazed with triumph. "You see?" she demanded.

Nobody felt much like cooking that night, and I've got to say I was relieved. We ordered a large pizza, with onions and olives and extra cheese, and ate in the living room so that Professor Woodhouse could watch *Lassie* and *The Love Connection*.

"Don't think you're fooling me, Iphigenia," she said severely. "This whole silly business with Jennifer was an excuse. You just wanted to see That Man again, to get him into the house so that you could sneak into corners with him

when my back was turned, and do nasty things."

Tonight there was nothing strained about Miss Woodhouse's smile. She had a bruise as big as Cleveland on her chin but seemed utterly at peace. "We didn't do any nasty things, Mother. All that ended years ago. But there was no one else I could turn to in this situation. Not many policemen would be willing to bend the rules that much to get evidence against those two. And without evidence, no jury would have believed Jennifer's story."

"I believed it," I said, a little tentatively. I still didn't know whether or not I'd gotten the job, so I wasn't sure I had the right to an opinion. "Oh, sure, it sounded crazy at first, when she realized the interview was a trap and got all hysterical. But I thought her story made sense. She goes to that party last month, meets Clayton Davis, likes him, wants to impress him. So she tells him that her father runs a country club and that she knows a way to sneak onto the grounds after hours, and they decide to grab a sixpack and take a midnight stroll on the golf course. That's not hard to believe. Lots of kids do crazy things like that."

"Yes," Miss Woodhouse agreed, "but the next part strains credibility a bit, doesn't

it? That they just happened to be walking past the storage shed while Nancy Bracken and Adonis and the fence were inside, dividing the profits from the Bradford burglary. That Jennifer and Clayton could hear them quarreling about how long to wait before the next burglary. And poor Clayton just happening to step on a twig, at just exactly the wrong moment—that sounds like something from a cheap, melodramatic thriller."

I nodded. But it had never sounded like a thriller to me. It had sounded just plain sickening. I could still see Jennifer shaking as she told us about it—how she and Clayton had raced desperately across the golf course, how she had heard the two shots explode behind them, how Clayton had groaned and fallen, how she had looked back in terror, just once, and seen Nancy Bracken, her face grim and ugly in the glare of Adonis's flashlight, a gun in her hand. And then, somehow, Jennifer had made it to the woods bordering the fourth hole, had tumbled into a shallow gulley and huddled there, sweating and shivering and trying not to sob, until the footsteps and the curses had faded. Just before dawn, she had gone home and cut off her hair.

Miss Woodhouse reached for another slice of pizza, one with only a few traces of olive on it. While her mother was absorbed in watching a Tylenol commercial, she furtively plucked the olive bits off, rolling them up in a paper napkin. "Ironic, isn't it?" she said. "If Christopher Sinclair had been anything vaguely approximating a decent father, Jennifer would have been doomed. But he had never let her come to his club, didn't even have her picture on his desk, had barely mentioned her to Nancy Bracken. So Bracken had no reason to suspect that the orange-haired punkster running across the golf course might be her employer's daughter."

"Not until you urged him to be friendlier to Jennifer," Professor Woodhouse put in, and I almost choked on my pizza. I hadn't realized she was still listening. "That wasn't terribly bright of you, was it, Iphigenia?"

"Oh, but you can't blame her," I said, alarmed. True, Miss Woodhouse's attempt to help had set off a chain of nearly disastrous events—Christopher Sinclair's telling Nancy Bracken about the abrupt change in Jennifer, Nancy Bracken's figuring out the connection and calling the fence, who followed Jennifer to

the church and tried to kill her. But it didn't seem fair to hold Miss Woodhouse responsible for all that. "How could she possibly have known what would happen?" I asked.

"She fancies herself a great detective," Professor Woodhouse countered. "Great detectives ought to be able to deduce things—things far more unlikely than the pitifully obvious scheme those nasties were operating. I declare, I'm ashamed of you, Iphigenia. It was right under your nose the entire time, but you never took the trouble to glance down."

I thought she was being awfully harsh, but Miss Woodhouse just nodded meekly. "You're quite right, Mother. It was obvious—Nancy Bracken chatting with club members to see when they'd be out of town, the parking lot attendant making impressions of their keys, the fence helping them pull the burglaries and dispose of their valuables. And the sudden change in Jennifer's appearance—I should have considered the possibility that she had witnessed a crime and was afraid of being recognized by the criminals. I was culpably unimaginative."

"If you ask me, Mr. Sinclair's the one who's culpable," I said. "Didn't it just rip your heart out when Jennifer said she was

afraid to go to the police because they might not believe her, and she was afraid to go to her father because he *might* believe her, and might hand her over to Nancy Bracken, just to spare the club bad publicity. What a forty-carat creep! That was good advice you gave her, Miss Woodhouse, about keeping her grades up so she can go away to college next year. I hope she picks a school in California."

"Or, better yet, Alaska," Miss Woodhouse said. She looked at her mother with a shy, tentative smile. "There are so many horrible parents in the world. That's one reason why we must always cherish the good ones."

The professor stared at her coldly. "Don't try to flatter me, you nasty girl. You handled this case very clumsily, and no amount of sentiment can disguise that fact. You'll notice, by the way, that I was right about poor little Jennifer's reasons for going to that church. She went there to pray, of course. It was the anniversary of poor little Clayton's death, and she was feeling guilty and frightened and in need of guidance and forgiveness. And she nearly got killed. All thanks to you, Iphigenia."

Miss Woodhouse nodded

again, looking low and miserable. Maybe it was stupid to step between mother and daughter just then, but I couldn't stop myself. "But she saved Jennifer, Professor Woodhouse," I protested. "The trap that we set this afternoon—telling Nancy Bracken that Jennifer was in the house, so that she'd tell Adonis to make copies of my keys and they'd come here to murder the witness—all that was Miss Woodhouse's idea. Jennifer's safe now, and the police believe every word of her story, and those two are on their way to prison. Doesn't your daughter deserve credit for that?"

The professor scowled at me. With great dignity, she took a last bite of pizza, then set her plate down on the coffee table and reached for a tangled mess of knitting. "That will be quite enough out of you," she said, and thrust a knitting needle squarely into the middle of an immense knot of lilac and orange. "Why must you always take her side, you nasty girl?"

Miss Woodhouse sputtered loudly, just once, and clapped her hands over her mouth, and turned her face aside, her body shaking with suppressed laughter.

Suddenly, I somehow felt sure I had the job.

Torrent

by William Beechcroft

Drilling the blast hole with hammer and rod was slow going. But maybe Mr. Llewellyn was right, Giovanni thought as he slammed the oversized hammer against the end of the steel rod Stefan held in place. The blast hole deepened in the ebony anthracite face only a quarter inch with each blow, but the dynamite would loosen a lot more coal than his and Stefan's and Yanek's hard going with their picks.

"My two Polacks and a dago," Mr. Llewellyn called them, right to Giovanni's face. A Welsh *bastardo*. But Mr. Llewellyn gave the three of them work, even if it was *illegale* in this deserted slope mine; deserted, Giovanni knew, not only because the market for Pennsylvania anthracite had slackened off right after the war, but also because this mine had been closed for safety. No doubt because two years ago eleven miners had been crushed in a cave-in just a quarter mile up one of the many side tunnels behind them. And maybe also because the workings were so near the Susquehanna River. Now, in 1947, the mine was officially closed, its entrance boarded up.

None of that appeared to bother Mr. Llewellyn. Six days a week, skinny Giovanni Silvestro, Stefan "Worrier Bull" Popowski, and "No Talk" Yanek Belinski squeezed through the entrance boards to pick and shovel all day in darkness. In the late evening, Carlo would rumble his truck into the cut just below the entrance. The boards were pried loose, and Mr. Llewellyn's two Polacks and a dago would trundle load after load along the narrow-gauge track to the mine opening. Then they would tip their laden tram car into the truck.

Everyone was sworn to secrecy. The vein was still rich, and it was there for the stealing. All that bothered Mr. Llewellyn was the slowness of their work. If he would come down here with them, he would see how much *sudore*—how much sweat—it took to load the little mine car just one time.

But Mr. Llewellyn did pay promptly every week. Fifteen dollars cash for each mine car load they chipped from the coal face with

hand-stinging pick blows, shoveled into the little tram, then shoved along the rattly track to Carlo's truck, waiting in the night at the tumbledown mine entrance. The loading of the truck was done in the dark to reduce Mr. Llewellyn's risk. But nothing reduces our risk, Giovanni thought as he banged his rhythmic blows against the drilling rod, taking care to hit it squarely. That was not easy in the swaying circle of light from the electric lamp on his hard hat, and Stefan's big, gloved hands were only inches below the top of the rod.

They had worked without speaking for a quarter of an hour when Stefan suddenly said in the flat silence between hammer blows, "I do not like this."

"The work, I am doing it," Giovanni pointed out. "You are only holding the rod."

"Not the work. The dynamite. We have not used dynamite before. We are not, how you say, powder monkeys. Do you know how much to use?"

"Enough to break up this *maledetto* coal face," Giovanni grunted as he swung the hammer again. Stefan was always big with the *agitazione*—with worry.

"But we are not even sure where we are."

"We are in this cursed hole, that's where we are."

"But," said Stefan, the Worrier Bull, "we do not know what is above. We should have a survey."

"If you are worrying about the river," Giovanni said, "I have paced from the entrance to here. Three thousand steps. The river is four thousand. I paced that, too, up there on Saturday."

Four thousand paces through October-chilled brambles and mountain laurel and leathery rhododendrons. He had been tired, bone-aching, and the hilly walk to the river was strewn with boulders. It had been four thousand paces. He was . . . sure. *Certo*. Stefan was always full with the *agitazione grande*.

Giovanni slammed the end of the drilling rod six more times. More than deep enough into the coal face now for a stick of the brown, paraffin paper-wrapped *dynamite*. Deep enough for two sticks. He hadn't realized how hard he had been hammering.

"Two?" Stefan asked. In the wobbly light of Giovanni's lantern, his broad, black-streaked face peered upward like that of an uncertain child.

"Yanek, the cap and fuse."

The silent Pole, in a rare burst of words when Giovanni had told

them Mr. Llewellyn could get them dynamite, had claimed he'd done some blasting work in a New Jersey quarry.

As he slid the yard-long orange fuse into the cap, then pushed the cap into the end of one of the explosive sticks, Yanek did look like he knew what he was doing. He slipped the primed stick into the hole, thrust it all the way in with the rod, and turned his long horseface toward Giovanni.

"Two sticks, Yanek."

Yanek looked briefly at Stefan, who glanced at Giovanni, then shrugged. Yanek shrugged, too, and put the second stick of sixty-five percent Du Pont "Extra" into the hole, careful not to dislodge the already-placed fuse.

He stood and nodded.

They gathered their shovels and picks, tossed them into the empty tram, and trundled it a hundred yards down the tunnel to where there was a bend. The tram always pushed easier out than in, even when it was loaded. Which told Giovanni that the tunnel sloped upward a little as it penetrated the bowels of the mountain.

"You wait here," he told them, and he trotted back to the loaded face. His first match went out. The second flared against the little exposed black O of powder in the end of the fuse. It sputtered, then caught with the hiss of a giant serpent. Giovanni dropped the flaring end of the fuse and raced back to the bend in the tunnel.

They huddled behind the tram in dead silence. From here they could not see the blue flame tongue of the fuse nor hear its eager sizzle. They heard nothing, not even each other's breathing. The tunnel's stale, gassy air closed over them like a stifling blanket.

Stefan, the Worrier Bull, said in a voice that startled everyone, "Did it go out?"

"Mr. Llewellyn said two minutes per yard of fuse. It is a yard—"

Giovanni's next word was swallowed in the ball of air and stinging coal dust that flew down the tunnel to slam them like something solid. Then the thunderclap of the explosion made his ears sing. He smelled the acrid, earthy odor of raw coal. They began to push the tram back up the tunnel's track.

Then the Worrier Bull jerked straight up. "What is *that!*!"

They stood in silence. Over the ringing in his ears, Giovanni now heard it, too. A trickling. Water in this tunnel that had remained bone dry even in last month's hard rains?

The chilling trickle suddenly grew into a frightening rush. In a single second, Giovanni knew: his pacing had been *imperfetto*. The

tunnel sloped upward, toward the surface. The *dynamite*—sixty-five percent nitro—had been too powerful. The—

From the shattered coal face came a roar as the tunnel roof collapsed. In the beams of their headlamps, a glittering black wall surged down the tunnel straight for them.

"Jesus, God!" Stefan shouted.

They were in the act of crossing themselves when the inrushing flood slammed them backwards. The impact rammed the air from Giovanni's lungs. *Angelica, I—*

In seconds, irresistible tons of filthy water filled the tunnel. Any-one standing near the mine's entrance would have been astounded to see a thick black jet propel three mangled bodies and a shattered tram car from the hole partway up the mountainside. But no one was there when the silence of early evening was broken by the outrush of water and its grisly burden.

The small valley below quickly filled with the dirty flow that gushed from the mine until a sizeable lake was formed where there had been only scrubby brush and a winding gravel road. The inky torrent swiftly drowned Stefan's old Chevy, and only when the valley's water level reached the top of the entrance did the flow slacken, then stop. In the twilight silence, the three bodies floated like bundles of filthy rags in a lake black as licorice.

The silence of the newly-formed lake was deceptive. When its level reached the level of the river on the other side of the mountain, the flow into the lake stopped.

But deep underground, incoming water now crashed down the side tunnels, broke open the narrow walls between adjacent abandoned diggings, raced through the network of old mines that honeycombed the earth beneath Neshamong Township and the Borough of Neshamong itself.

The water's hungry search for underground space was insatiable, and it was fed by the mighty Susquehanna River. It was the Susquehanna. The three bootleg miners had blown a hole in the river-bed fifty feet from shore. Now in roared an inexhaustible rush of water that had its origins a hundred miles away in the Finger Lakes.

At eight fifteen P.M., Davis Llewellyn received a panicky telephone call from his truck driver.

"The mine, Mr. Llewellyn, she's gone!"

"Gone? What in hell's name do you mean, Carlo?"

"No mine. Only a lake."

"You drunk?"

"No, Mr. Llewellyn. The Number Four mine, she's gone. The road, she's gone. The *vallata*, the . . . the valley, she's full with water."

Llewellyn was nonplussed, but in control. "Go home then," he ordered the lumpish Carlo. "And you keep your mouth shut, you hear me?"

He hung up and sank heavily into his overstuffed reading chair by the parlor's front window. His house lay across the dead end of West Carbon Street, not a big house, but not as small as the houses that lined the sides of the winding street. He planned to buy those houses one by one at forced sale prices as their idled owners left Neshamong for the factories of Philadelphia or Camden. One day he would own the whole street, and he was certain it would be only a matter of time until the mountain resort on nearby Shannon Ridge would expand and swallow all the available land on this side of the borough.

For an out-of-work mine manager, he was doing all right. Eight crews of bootleggers steadily chipped enough coal out of the area's closed but still-rich diggings to build him a nice bank account—quietly and steadily enlarged by mail deposits in a bank in distant California. The new paint on his house? The new Studebaker in his driveway? His housekeeper who came five days a week to clean and cook for him? The townspeople had accepted his story about a well-to-do grandmother dying in far off Cardiff, Wales, and leaving him a generous annual income.

He pressed his fingertips to his broad temples. A lake, for God's sake, where there had been a secluded valley . . .

Then his two hundred thirty pounds of idle-soft flesh quivered beneath his Irish tweed trousers and wool shirt. His two Polacks and the dago had been given dynamite this morning. The dumb bastards must have blown the roof, and the roof was the bottom of the river. Great God almighty!

He slumped back, his fingers pinching his doughy chin. They surely were dead now. Who else knew? Carlo, of course, Carlo was in this too deep to say anything to anybody. There was no one else. Llewellyn had purposely kept his crooked operation as small as possible, not only for economy's sake, but for a situation just like this.

He sat straighter now. The two big Poles and the little dago he'd

assigned to Number Four had been productive, but he could hire other desperate miners looking for a dollar. And there were plenty more boarded-up but still workable diggings he could plunder.

Davis Llewellyn, determined to be a rich man before he hit fifty, smiled to himself. Aside from him and Carlo, no one else knew. When the bodies were found, the blame would fall on them, not on him.

He picked up the evening paper and concentrated on the financial pages while black water began its rush through the abandoned workings beneath the Borough of Neshamong.

No one else knew.

But someone else did know. One night Giovanni had returned blackened and weary, and again telling Angelica that he had a late shift at the mattress factory, she told him that was a lie. She knew coal dust from lint. He was working a mine, *si?*

"You accuse your husband of a lie?"

"When he does not tell the truth."

Angelica had more going for her than simple confrontation. For a full month, pleading various excuses, she had not let Giovanni touch her. Now she softened.

"*Caro mio*, I will be honest with you. Tonight, I want you. But you must be honest with me. I cannot make love with a dishonest man."

And when they were close together in the warm bed, he had told her.

This very morning, before he left with the two others in Stefan's old car, he had told her more. He had told her of the *dynamite*, and his fear of it. When midnight passed and he had not returned, she felt dreadfully alone and frightened. She'd had no children in eight years of marriage. All her relatives were in the old country. She had only Giovanni. And now ice in her heart told her something terrible had happened to him.

She heard it on their scratchy Philco radio just after dawn. The river had broken through and was flooding the old mine workings. The dynamite! Giovanni had feared the dynamite. Now Angelica knew.

She ran to the nearby house of Katrin Popowski, Stefan's wife. She learned that Katrin also knew about the bootleg mining, and Katrin told Angelica about Yanek Belinski's part in it. Together

they ran to the house of Stani Belinski, and it turned out that the three of them knew about the secret mining by their husbands, but only Angelica had known about Mr. Llewellyn's part in it.

"But he is such a big man in Neshamong," blonde little Stani Belinski pointed out. "No one would believe this. Then what would happen to us?"

"What will happen to us now anyway?" asked Katrin Popowski, folding her big arms defiantly.

But in the end, they decided there was no use in an accusation that no one would believe.

Then Angelica, her deep brown eyes flashing anger, said, "I know who can do something."

"Who?" Katrin asked.

"Signora Miracolosa."

"Who is she?"

Angelica told her.

The day after the mine flooding, Davis Llewellyn drove his Studebaker to the end of the macadam pavement near the riverbank. He carefully locked the shiny green car and walked the rest of the way.

He was surprised by the size of the crowd that had already gathered on the steep, rocky bank to stare out into the current where a whirlpool dented the slatelike surface. The network of mines that spread from here for miles under the township was sucking the river in through that spinning hole.

Down the river floated a half-submerged tree limb as long as his Studebaker, its branches sticking up like dead fingers. It drifted slowly in the current until it neared the whirlpool. Then it moved faster. The huge limb veered toward the sucking hole in the water, flipped into it. And was gone in the blink of an eye. A long "Ohhh!" rose from the crowd.

Llewellyn, standing away from the rest of them, had seen enough. He stamped back through the weeds and brush to his car. "God damn those three thick foreign bastards!" he muttered as he opened the Studebaker's door. But they were dead now. Their bodies had been discovered at first light by a horrified Neshamong man, hunting rabbits out of season to feed his hungry family. Llewellyn had been right. The township police had already put the blame on these three men who had obviously been bootleg mining and had broken through the riverbed.

On the day after the disaster, two unusual things happened. The first was so dramatic that films of it appeared on the fluttery black-and-white Pathé television box that Davis Llewellyn had bought just last month, the first person in Neshamong to own such a device. The broadcast wobbled up the valley from Wilkes-Barre and Llewellyn was able to fiddle with the horizontal hold control so that the picture stayed fairly steady.

And what a picture it was. The Pennsylvania Bureau of Mines had managed to slap together a short spur line from the nearby Lackawanna railroad tracks. And the mine safety engineers had somehow assembled a string of dilapidated freight cars. On the pulsating television screen, a small engine shoved the snake of freight cars out on the spur, out over the river bank. Then one by one, the huge freight cars toppled off the end of the improvised spur and crashed into the whirlpool. And each was instantly whisked from sight as if it were of no more consequence than a match box.

Now everyone knew that the river's cascade into the old mine workings could not be staunched. It would stop only when the township's honeycombed underpinnings were gorged with black water.

Yet, Llewellyn told himself, all he had to do was keep his mouth shut, and he was in the clear. Then the second unusual thing happened that day. When he walked out his front door to drive to the post office to mail the week's bank deposit, he noticed a woman standing on the sidewalk a hundred feet up the left side of West Carbon Street. A woman in a long, shapeless black dress, her face obscured by a dark shawl she wore as a hood. She seemed to stare straight at him, even turning to face him as he drove away.

When he returned, she was still there.

His housekeeper—"just another dago woman named Maria," he'd told the boys at O'Sheen's Tavern, the only one left in town—had a strange reaction to the creepy woman. After Maria nodded a goodbye to Llewellyn that afternoon, he saw her stop dead on his front walk, then hurriedly cross herself and walk up the right side of the street. He knew she lived a quarter mile up the left side.

When he pushed the lace curtains apart an inch and peered out just before sitting down to the supper Maria had made for him, the woman was gone. He shrugged to himself and muttered, "Takes all kinds."

She was back the next morning in the same place. Unmoving as stone, staring at his house. When Maria pushed open the door and shucked off her threadbare coat, he was waiting in the hallway.

"Who in hell is that hanging around out there?"

She didn't answer.

"I asked you a question, woman!"

Again, Maria was silent.

His face flushed, and he felt like slapping her. "Answer me!"

The housekeeper turned to him slowly, her face pale and hard as granite. "She is Signora Miracolosa."

"Mrs. Miracle?" His bray of laughter made Maria's thin blue lips tighten. "What's her claim to fame?"

She muttered something he didn't catch.

"What? What did you say?"

Maria's voice was almost a whisper. "The Eye."

"The what?"

"The Evil Eye."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Llewellyn exploded. "Go on with your work."

Bunch of damned superstitious Sicilianos infested this burg. Took a smart Welshman to make a buck here.

The next morning, he stormed out his front door and strode right up to this "Mrs. Miracle." He was surprised to find that under the shadow of her hood she was frail and not nearly so tall as she had appeared from his parlor window. In fact, she seemed dead already. Except for her eyes. Something like blue anthracite flames danced in those sunken eyes. He forgot what he had planned to say.

"Go home, dammit!" he managed.

Her fiery, unblinking stare cut right through him.

Yet back behind the window again, he figured that was only because Maria had told him the old woman had the Evil Eye. He snorted. Maybe they were working together to give him a scare.

Why? No one else but Carlo knew.

The following day, the old woman was there again. He began to wonder if somehow there really could be a connection between her and what had happened at Number Four mine. That didn't seem possible, but might Carlo have let his tongue get away from him after too many beers at O'Sheen's?

No, there'd be a lynch mob outside by now, not just one old woman. He looked through the slit in the curtains again. She stood there like Death without a scythe.

Damned if he'd let this get to him. Go about your business, Davis Llewellyn, he told himself. He was beginning to understand how the so-called Evil Eye worked. It ate from the inside. Signora Miracolosa just stood out there, really doing nothing at all until you ripped yourself apart with a heart attack or maybe collapsed from just plain worry. Like the voodoo stuff he'd read about. Neat trick. But he wasn't having any.

The week dragged on, and the impact of the mine collapse and the river's invasion dulled a bit. The fuzzy television news pictures had moved on to a national story concerning a suspected subversive curiously named Hiss.

He could laugh at the persistent old woman, now that he knew what her game was. Life went on; Carlo faithfully delivered the coal sales money, minus the trucker's commissions, from the rest of the illegal operations. The Bureau of Mines people argued in the paper over what to do about all the water that sloshed around deep beneath the township. And Davis Llewellyn at last relaxed.

Until Saturday night, just before supper. He heaved out of his chair to take a last look through the parlor curtains. Still out there, she was. With her dumb, useless stare. Talk about a waste of—

What the hell was *that!* The whole house had just quivered. He grabbed the back of the chair. An earthquake here? In northeastern Pennsylvania?

Then the floor heaved again. He heard a muffled rumble right beneath his feet. In the cellar. Had one of the wooden floor support posts rotted away?

He pounded into the kitchen, opened the cellar door, and flicked the light switch. No light. Both bulbs blown? More likely a fuse. He banged down the long flight of wooden steps, sinking into darkness as he felt for the fuse box.

Then he felt a whoosh of cold air boil up around him, heard a noise like tons of earth falling, froze in midstride. But it was too late. The stairs collapsed under his feet. He slid downwards, the splintery handrail tearing his scrabbling palms.

His panic-stricken throat cut his scream of terror to a strangled squeak. Frozen-voiced, Davis Llewellyn plummeted through a hundred feet of empty space, and followed his basement floor into the raging black torrent that had undermined his house. The last sound he heard was the shriek of twisting timber, so very much like a woman's victorious cry.

The Woman Who Could Not Lie

by Evelyn Payne

Aurelia Hacker's bony fingers traveled swiftly over the typewriter keys. It wouldn't take long to finish the inventory, and then she could return to her apartment, read a chapter of the book, drink a glass of milk, and go to bed. A lesser woman might have taken the evening off after the excitement of the afternoon, but with Aurelia business came first. Hillock-Mitchem Realty, Sales and Rentals, was her only child, her alpha and omega. She resented the time the police had wasted that afternoon and the fact that they had sealed up the offices, but purely physical considerations were unimportant where business was concerned. She had the forethought to snatch the inventory from under the nose of the police, and now she was in the insurance office across the hall using one of their machines, which was in truly dreadful condition. But what could you expect of that silly little man, and those flighty girls? Why, she'd even seen strikeovers on some of their letters.

Naturally, after twenty-five years at the real estate office, she didn't need her whole mind to type an inventory of the furniture in a rented house, and the list of chattels lengthened methodically while she thought over the events of the day.

Her main emotion was indignation. Her nice clean office. Blood all over the rug, papers scattered everywhere, the police with their big dirty boots and fingerprinting mess, and Chief Barney Wilkins with his nasty, smelly cigars.

It would take weeks to get the odor out of the curtains and everything back in place. The disorder they'd created looking for that money!

If only T. H. Hillock hadn't been too lazy to take the money to the bank, or if that idiot buyer hadn't insisted on giving the twenty-five hundred dollars escrow money in cash, or if Claude Mitchem hadn't wanted to go over that advertising again, as if they could possibly prune it by another cent. Men! And women, women like Fran Keever. Not that Fran really deserved anything like that, but she had certainly been asking for something with all that black

THE WOMAN WHO COULD NOT LIE



NOTHING REMAINED IN THE ENTRY HALL EXCEPT THE OLD HATTRACK IN
THE CORNER, TILTING TIPSY.

stuff around her eyes, and clothes more suitable to a beach than a respectable business office.

Only a few days before, Aurelia had taken her to task about those clothes, and Fran, her green eyes glinting with mischief, had replied meekly, "Yes, Miss Hacker." Then she'd turned up the next day in a high-necked, longsleeved black dress that was twice as—well, go on, say it, Aurelia—twice as sexy as anything she had ever worn before. Don't think the men hadn't noticed it, either! Every man who'd come into the office had stared and straightened his tie and practically drooled. Claude, who had stopped hanging around the files the way he had when Fran first came to work, had spent nearly all day looking up totally unimportant papers. T. H., who usually arrived at nine and left at nine thirty, had lingered half the day. Charley Quinn had whistled out loud. Until then, Aurelia had rather approved of him because he was quiet and well-mannered and nice looking in a sandy sort of way, but after that whistle . . . She hadn't been a bit surprised to hear that he was guilty.

She was still going strong when she heard the *whoosh* of the doorcloser on the front door and a man's heavy footsteps coming down the hall. She looked up without missing a letter, when the steps reached the open door.

"Good evening, Tom. Did you want something?" she inquired coldly. Tom Faraday might be a good doctor, but he was certainly sloppy looking, and more than once when she'd met him on her way home at night she'd smelled liquor on his breath.

"You, Aurelia," he said sternly, his gaunt face more tired and grim than usual.

"I'm busy. What do you want me for?" she demanded, slipping the sheets out of the machine and removing the carbons.

"To tell a lie."

Her gasp was more horrified incredulity than indignation. The papers slipped out of her hands onto the floor.

"Oh, I know. You've never told a lie in your life. I've heard you brag about it," he said angrily, holding up a hand as she threatened to interrupt. "But you've never done a decent human thing, either. It's high time you began. Charley Quinn's mother is dying. She's been sick a long time, and this thing this afternoon gave her the final push. Aurelia, she's going to die happy, because you're going over and tell her that her son did not murder Fran Keever."

"How dare you suggest such a thing? Why, I don't even know

the woman," Aurelia objected indignantly, leaning down to pick up the papers.

"I'll introduce you," he offered dryly.

"And I don't know whether Charley is guilty or not. He probably is, if the police arrested him. A jury—"

"Mrs. Quinn can't wait for a jury. She's dying. *Dying now*. You're involved in this affair and you have a reputation for telling the truth. If you tell her, she'll die happy. Happier, anyway!" he shouted.

"I've never told an untruth in my life and I do not intend to start now." Two red spots burned in her sallow cheeks and she was straighter, if possible, than ever. "People know they can depend on what I say."

"Sure, to tell them unpleasant facts about their hats and their children's behavior. Surely, Aurelia," he pleaded, "since you've known Charley Quinn for several years, you can't possibly think he's guilty of killing that poor girl and stealing that money?"

"I haven't thought about it one way or another. It's not my business. I told the police what I saw and heard. I know nothing about him except the amount of real estate he's sold, and I've made it a practice not to form or express opinions about the office or the business. It cost the company a deal once," she said flatly, turning back to put the cover on the typewriter.

"The company! That's all you think about. This might cost a man his life. It's costing Mrs. Quinn her life right now, and you say it isn't any of your business. Think!" he thundered, pounding the desk. "Think of your immortal soul, Aurelia, if you have one!"

He sounded almost like the preacher in the country meeting-house of her childhood, and a shiver ran down her back. For a long minute she and the doctor looked at each other, and in the end it was her eyes that fell. Slowly, still rebellious, she put on her hat and coat and followed him out to his car.

She was in turmoil. To someone else it might have seemed a minor thing, but to her it was treason, betrayal, an abrogation of the principle by which she lived. In all her fifty-six years she had always told the truth as she saw it, no white lie, no polite fib, no mendacious silence. No hint of powder softened the long sharp outline of her nose, not even the palest of lipsticks concealed the prim line of her lips, no frill hid the stepladder lines on which she was fashioned. Yet now she was going to tell a lie, a deliberate, premeditated falsehood, because insofar as she had considered the

matter she really did think Charley Quinn was guilty. So did the police and so, undoubtedly, would a jury.

For a moment she felt she could not possibly do it, and she put out a hand to the doorhandle. As if he sensed what she was thinking, the doctor turned and said quietly, "I only hope we're not too late." She withdrew the hand, and they rode in silence to the modest little house.

Inside it was very dim and silent. The nurse glanced curiously at Aurelia, but all she said was, "No change, Dr. Faraday. She's conscious."

He nodded and turned to Aurelia. "Make it good."

Hesitantly she advanced into the bedroom, looking about a little desperately, trying to gather strength from the inexpensive, tidy furnishings. Only the barely discernible rise and fall of the covers indicated that Mrs. Quinn was still breathing. There were bluish shadows around her nose and temples, and the curiously tender lips were faintly violet. She lay with her face turned to the bedside table, on which were several photographs of Charley and a small bunch of withering flowers.

Aurelia remembered that Charley took his mother some flowers every evening on his way home from the office. She had seen him in the florist's shop the night before, buying—why, they must have been these very blossoms!

Her heart, which had done nothing but pump blood for years, contracted suddenly, and her eyes stung. Swiftly she knelt beside the bed and took one of the thin hands in hers.

"Mrs. Quinn," she said softly, even gently, "I am Aurelia Hacker. I've come to tell you about Charley."

The woman's eyes opened and her lips moved. Aurelia could barely make out the words. "Kind . . . of you. My son?"

"He's all right. It's all a mistake. He isn't guilty. I know," Aurelia stated in the same flat tone she used for announcing interest rates. It carried conviction, just as it always had.

This time Mrs. Quinn's voice was strong and joyful. "Thank you . . . knew it couldn't be . . . he's a good . . ." That was her last breath, but there was a shadow of a smile on the dead face.

"That was the best thing you ever did," the doctor said huskily as he bent over the bed. "That was a good lie, better than a lot of truths."

Abruptly Aurelia was herself again. She said firmly, "That was not a lie. He is not guilty."

She had never believed in intuition. Facts were more important, easier to deal with, solid. But now something obscure and powerful (perhaps merely an overwhelming desire to recapture her reputation for truthfulness) compelled her to repeat, "Charley Quinn is innocent."

Tom Faraday straightened up and stared at her, and the nurse, moving about softly, paused also.

"Are you sure? How do you know?" he asked.

"I'm not sure exactly. Now that I think of it, I don't believe he could do a thing like that. There was something that bothered me this afternoon, some discrepancy, something I forgot. But I'll think of it."

"Well, don't go broadcasting it, for heaven's sake," he said, putting on his coat. "This guy, whoever he is, won't hang any higher for killing two women; so keep it quiet."

It was only a vague feeling, the uncomfortable sensation that sends you back to check ashtrays and pilot lights, but as Aurelia walked from the office toward her apartment, it grew stronger, more definite. *Something forgotten*. She hurried on, forgetting to pick up her usual quart of milk at the Health Cafeteria where she ate most of her meals, omitting also an evening paper from the newsstand. Home, she tossed her hat and coat on a chair instead of hanging them up, fixed herself a hurried meal out of the refrigerator, and sat down to think.

The beginning was, of course, the Hillock-Mitchem Realty Company. Aurelia had been there for twenty-five years, had handled the details of every deal, had come to take her fellow workers for granted. Now she had to reverse the process, for after T. H. had come in with the twenty-five hundred dollars in the envelope, no one else had entered the office. (Testimony of the legless veteran who sold pencils out in front.) She had suggested taking the money right over to the bank.

"Aurelia, you worry too much," he had said, thrusting the envelope into the safe and shutting, but not locking, the door. "You can make out a deposit slip and drop it into the night depository on your way home. In the meantime, you and Fran are here, aren't you?"

"I don't like it. The whole thing is most irregular," she had fretted.

T. H. had appealed to Claude, who went over and shoved the envelope deeper into the safe and said, "Sure, it'll be all right for

that length of time. You make the deposit slip, Aurelia, and I'll drop it by myself. And as soon as you've got things under control here, come to my office. I want to go over that Monte Vista advertising again. I still think—"

"Every penny comes right out of your tightfisted little soul, doesn't it, Claude?" T. H. had commented unpleasantly. Then he'd put on his hat and coat and gone out the north door into the hall that led to the outside door. Aurelia heard him walk the few steps to the door, but it had been subconscious, for she was busy typing a letter, clearing up the papers on her desk, giving some to Fran to file, and generally getting ready for the next day. There would be no other time if Claude insisted on going over those ads again. Fran was already busy filing, going from one to another of the cabinets, and she received Aurelia's instructions with an impatient wiggle of her shoulders. Aurelia frowned, picked up her notebook and pencil, and went out the west door and up the main hall to Claude's cluttered office.

She had sat there, tapping a mental toe, thinking of the things she could or should be doing, for nine minutes. By turning in her chair she could see the hall all the way down to where, at the corner of her own office, it turned right and became the entry hall. She caught a glimpse of Charley Quinn crossing from his office to somewhere—probably the restroom, although it could as easily have been her own office.

Then the phone had rung, and before she could switch the call, she had heard Claude answer in T. H.'s room next door, saying at exasperated intervals, "Yes, ma'am . . . no, ma'am . . . sorry, ma'am . . . I couldn't possibly."

Then he had come in, his round, pettish face redder than ever. "That pest, Mrs. Middlebottom."

For ten minutes they went over the same old ground on the subdivision advertising. Out of the corner of her eye, Aurelia had seen Charley go back to his own office. Finally Claude, with a dissatisfied grunt, had given up, and she had hurried down the hall to her office.

She screamed. There were papers scattered wildly all over the floor, and in the midst of them lay Fran Keever. Even at a glance it was obvious that she was dead—the blood and the paperknife sticking out of her back only confirmed it. The door of the safe was open and the envelope was gone.

They were all in there the next minute, milling around excitedly.

Aurelia, although she was shaken, found herself taking charge, sending Claude to phone the police, restraining Charley's efforts to move the body, and thrusting, bodily, the hysterical insurance trio into their own offices. The police came, followed in a minute or two by T. H., his handsome face drawn and anxious.

The medical examiner came and went, taking poor Fran with him. The offices were searched wildly for the money, and the fingerprint expert dusted every possible surface with powder. Barney Wilkins sat himself down in Aurelia's own chair and asked questions, wiggling his heavy eyebrows and pursing his fat lips importantly. Half the town's population was standing outside, voluble with horrified curiosity, and Barney had stationed a young patrolman at the door to keep them out.

The insurance people had been in their offices with the doors shut for two solid hours, so they were allowed, even encouraged, to leave.

T. H., lighting one cigarette after another and tapping his long fingers on the table, said weakly that he didn't know exactly what time he'd left the office. He'd walked down the street, greeting several people on the way to the Haddonville *Courier*, where he'd been talking to the editor when he saw the police car draw up.

"I'll never forgive myself. If I hadn't insisted on leaving the money here, if I'd taken it to the bank, as you wanted me to, Aurelia, this awful thing wouldn't have happened," he said brokenly, and sat with his head in his hands.

Claude sheepishly admitted that after he'd left her office he'd gone to the supply room and taken a drink of whisky. "Hair of the dog, you know, chief. That banquet last night—" Aurelia sniffed, but Barney looked sympathetic—he'd been there himself.

"I'd been taking aspirin and black coffee all day and finally couldn't take it any longer—don't like drinking in the office—never have—but it was either that or go home," Claude explained, running a hand through his stubble of graying hair. "I sat on a box there for a minute or two. Then I went into T. H.'s office through the side door and hunted for the stuff I wanted to talk to Aurelia about. Couldn't find it right away—he keeps things in such a mess. Then the phone rang—Mrs. Asa Middlebottom. I talked to her a minute or two and went into my office. Don't know how long Aurelia and I talked, but if she says it was ten minutes, then it was. She's always right."

Charley was the last. "I came in about quarter to four to write

a contract, a damn complicated thing that probably won't go. But I messed it up, so I started over, and that lousy typewriter jammed. I poked around and found a staple down inside. Since I was already filthy, I decided to oil it. Then I went to wash my hands." He looked pale but not unduly upset. "Then I rewrote the contract. I had just finished when Aurelia yelled."

"Don't look to me like you got your hands very clean," Barney commented.

"There was only a sliver of soap in the washroom and no brush," Charley said, looking at his black fingers.

"Did you know about the money in the safe?"

"I could say no, but it wouldn't be true. I heard T. H. and Aurelia discussing it—my door was open. I could hear Claude mumbling."

The typewriter, an old noiseless, had been freshly oiled; there was a torn contract in the wastebasket and a complete one lying on the desk. There was no sign of the money. Charley might not have been arrested if one of the other policemen hadn't come in just then and whispered something in Barney's ear. The chief's bushy eyebrows met and he said, looking like a very elephantine cat about to pounce, "You and Fran had been runnin' around together some, Charley?"

"Why—why, yes. We did have occasional dates," he admitted. "I liked her. She was a lot of fun."

"Had an argument with her last night, out to the Blue Moon, didn't you?"

"Well, I suppose you might call it that. I wanted to leave because it was almost midnight," Charley explained slowly, "and the woman who looks after my mother doesn't like to stay later than that. Fran knew it, and usually she was nicer about it, but last night she'd had a number of drinks and wanted to stay longer. We—we discussed it a few minutes and then she found another guy who was staggering and he said he'd take her home. So I left. I—well, naturally I wasn't too happy about it." He lifted his head defiantly. "But I wasn't mad or anything like that."

"Just irritated enough to kill her."

"I didn't kill her! No!"

Barney kept asking questions, especially about what he'd done with the money and hadn't his mother's illness cost him a lot? Charley denied it indignantly.

"I make enough money. Ask Aurelia—she'll tell you. And my mother has a small pension."

It really wasn't much of a case, but Barney arrested him anyway.

Aurelia hadn't thought much about it then, but now, sipping at an unprecedented nighttime cup of coffee, she wondered why. Claude could have done it even more easily. He could have planned it, getting her, Aurelia, into his office, waiting in the supply room till the coast was clear. He could have slipped into the office, killed Fran—it would not have taken long, for apparently she had died instantly—grabbed the money, and gotten back to T. H.'s office in time to answer the phone. Claude had, she recalled, liked Fran a lot at first. Suppose she had not reciprocated. He was a vindictive man. The money would certainly appeal, and if there were any secret hiding places in the office, he would be the one to know, since he had personally supervised every stroke of the paintbrushes and the driving in of every nail during the alterations two years ago. But as far as Barney was concerned, it was inexpedient to arrest a Mitchem unless you had an airtight eyewitness case. A Mitchem had built the first house in Haddonville, and there had been two of them in the mayor's office and heaven knows what else.

T. H.? But he had left, had been out on the street or at the newspaper office—presumably. And he was married. Nevertheless, it would bear looking into, but Barney would never do it, for T. H.'s father-in-law owned half the town.

So Charley Quinn, a totally unimportant resident of a few years' standing, was a welcome scapegoat.

Somebody would have to do something, Aurelia decided grimly, remembering that she had never cared for Barney Wilkins. But what? The answer, she was sure, lay somewhere in her own mind, that bothersome forgotten item.

She made another cup of coffee and sat up long past her bedtime, thinking. She slept badly, dreaming confusedly about money and blood, and awoke tired and depressed, glad for once that she could not go to work. The office was still sealed up, presumably to let Barney and his minions tear it still further apart. She was too restless to stay home, so she put on her sensible hat and her shapeless gray coat and went out. She needed information and gossip, and Mattie Sloane was known as the biggest gossip in town.

Mattie welcomed her cordially, served coffee and homemade cookies, and listened sympathetically while Aurelia outlined the situation with regard to Charley Quinn.

"I always liked that boy, and I certainly never thought this town deserved to have anyone like Barney for chief of police. I'll tell you

what little I know," she said. "Fran wasn't a bit choosy—married or single, it was all the same to her. Mostly she went in for the ones with plenty of money, but I reckon sometimes she just wanted to have fun, like with Charley. Claude was supposed to be really stuck on her for a while. If he ever got around to proposing, which I doubt, she probably turned him down, knowing he'd want to live on wieners and she partial to steak. He probably didn't give her any expensive presents, but T. H. might've."

"He's married," Aurelia reminded her, "and he certainly didn't seem to pay much attention to her at the office."

Mattie laughed, her three chins quivering. "I don't think he'd done much playing around here in town. It'd be too much trouble dodging all those relatives of his wife."

Aurelia nodded. "Did you ever hear any gossip about him and Fran?"

Mattie leaned forward confidentially. "Far's I know, nobody ever saw them together around here. But someone—I won't say who—saw them going into a motel in Dallas. Last August."

Aurelia brightened. "Why, yes, I remember. T. H. went over to Fort Worth about a deal, and Fran took her vacation in Dallas at the same time. I remember because Claude was furious—we'd done business with that Fort Worth firm before by mail, and it was always quite satisfactory. But T. H. insisted."

Back home, she considered what she had learned. Of course, the money wouldn't have meant much to T. H., who made—and spent—plenty. But he had been the one who had brought the money into the office, had insisted on leaving it in the safe, unlocked. He might have taken it as a blind, though. Claude, of course, enjoyed every little driblet that came in and wept over every expenditure, but he was very cautious. Yet it had to be Claude, because she had seen T. H. leave, heard him walk to the outer door, even heard the door click shut, and Fran had still been alive.

At the office she found Barney strutting around excitedly. He said accusingly, "I hear, Aurelia, that you're sayin' Charley Quinn couldn'ta done it. Well, we got proof. We found the money stuck in the bottom part of that jar of sand you put out there for folks to stub out their cigarettes in. Reckon he figgered on pickin' it up later."

The urn was about two and a half feet high, made of some kind of cheap metal painted to look like pottery. Unlike the real pottery

urns, it came in two pieces, so that the top with the sand and the butts could be lifted off for emptying and washing. It stood just inside the outer door.

"Were his fingerprints on the envelope?" she asked.

Barney shook his head regretfully. "Likely he handled it with gloves."

"It's no proof at all, Barney. Any one of us could have put that envelope there," she said crushingly, and left.

It was clear that Barney had made up his mind, and any faint possibility that she might have persuaded him to do a little more looking around was gone. There was no time to investigate Claude's relations with Fran or go into the Dallas angle, just in case whatever it was that she had forgotten concerned T. H. But there was one thing. Tom Faraday could probably get her an answer there. She returned to Mattie's and phoned the doctor.

"I need some information, Tom, that you can probably get for me," she said crisply. "Barney's found the money and seems to think that settles things."

"Anything you like, Aurelia, as long as you don't want me to go traipsing off somewhere. I've got an office full of patients."

"Did they do an autopsy on Fran?"

"Probably not. The wound in' the back was obviously the cause of death. Why?" he asked interestedly.

She blushed a fiery red to the roots of her hair. "Was she—I mean, was she . . . ?"

"Pregnant? I don't know, but I can find out," he said thoughtfully. "That would put a different complexion on it."

She and Mattie gossiped aimlessly until the phone rang.

"You were right, Aurelia. Three months," the doctor informed her succinctly.

"I'm not surprised," Mattie told her. "The question now is who. T. H. couldn't marry her, if he's still in the picture, and I doubt that Claude would want to take a chance on playing father to someone else's baby—or even his own. Too expensive. My land, is that wind? Guess we're going to have a storm."

The back screen door started banging and suddenly swung wide with a long screech of hinges. Abruptly the detail Aurelia had been so feverishly pursuing presented itself to her. "Mattie!" she cried, putting her hand on the other's plump arm. "I know now. I've remembered."

"My land, Aury, who?"

"But I can't prove it," Aurelia went on, frowning. "And Barney won't pay any attention to anything except indisputable proof."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's only one way. A trap. Look, Mattie, do you suppose you could get it noised around to the right people, Barney included, that I'm going to the office tonight to look for a clue, something pointing directly to the murderer?"

"Oh, Aury, you can't," Mattie whispered, her face gray with fear. "He'll kill you, too."

"There's no other way," Aurelia repeated, deliberately not thinking of the possible danger. "There's no clue really, but he knows I know the office like the palm of my hand. He'll think perhaps he left something incriminating that only I would recognize. Now that they've found the money, the office is open again. About eight o'clock. It'll be good and dark by then."

Mattie agreed after much argument, stipulating only that Aurelia have dinner with her. Once started, however, she did her work well. Barney Wilkins, sitting down to supper, said loudly that it was all a piece of nonsense and that he, for one, wasn't going to be bothered with some old maid's nutty ideas about detective work. Tom Faraday, briskly slapping a newborn baby, swore under his breath. And in still another house someone else began to make plans.

The dinner would have rocked the Health Cafeteria to the bottom of its aseptic pots and pans, and Aurelia, the abstemious, found it hard to rise from the table. She grew more and more reluctant to start out on her risky journey. Life, hitherto merely a succession of days to be worked through, was suddenly very sweet.

Mattie clung to her, weeping, and it took quite a lot of talking to dissuade her from coming along. She did insist on going as far as the bus stop, and Aurelia found her presence comforting. Up till now nighttime had been merely the absence of daytime, a necessary but inconvenient period when work regrettably ceased. She had always walked fearlessly around the town at night, but tonight seemed darker and colder than other nights. Shadows were no longer merely shadows, but skittery patches of menace. The shrill wind sang an ominous tune and the gathering storm seemed infinitely more than just a spell of November weather.

She was hesitant to leave the warmth and light of the bus, and she gazed wistfully at the lighted windows of the drugstore. The desire for a cup of coffee, a moment of shelter there, was almost

overwhelming. But she pushed her feet, in their sensible shoes and old fashioned black rubbers, ahead. Finally, with a last regretful look around, she unlocked the door of the office and went in.

It was very still. The howling of the wind and the sudden lash of rain seemed muted and distant. The jar of sand was gone and nothing remained in the entry hall except the old hatrack in the corner, tilting tipsily.

Not till she was about to put the key into the lock of her own office door did she hear the sound, a long indrawn breath close by. Very close. She turned her flashlight back again on the hall. It was still empty. That meant he was either just around the corner or, more likely, just inside the door of her office.

Abruptly she was afraid as she had never been before. All the fears she had ever suffered were only childish qualms compared to the soul-wracking, body-shaking terror that seized her. Involuntarily, she took a step backward. Then she heard the sound again.

He's afraid, too, she thought, and it steadied her. He was undoubtedly inside her office and the question was how to get in. (What she intended to do after she got in, she deliberately ignored.) Of course, she could creep around to the other door, but the interior distance between doors was only about ten feet. He could reach there while she was still turning the key. She could try waiting him out in a war of nerves, but hers might give out first. She had to do something and do it fast. Nervously, she flashed the light around again. Ah!

Aurelia crept noiselessly down the hall and picked up the hatrack. She took off her hat, put it on top, spread her coat around the hooks, and buttoned it up. Perhaps it would work. It was all she had—it *had* to work.

She carried the hatrack back to her door, put the key in the lock, turned it carefully, recalling that the door always stuck a trifle. Then, holding the hatrack out in front of her, she kicked the bottom panel hard. The door flew open, and a dark shape, cursing, leapt on the hatrack, jerked it out of her hands, pulling her off her feet. For a second she and the hatrack and the man were all mixed up together, and then the lights went on, and Tom Faraday growled, "You're covered. Get up and put your hands behind your head. Aurelia, are you all right?"

She scrambled to her feet, careful to keep to one side, and turned to look. Still cursing, the man was disentangling himself. When he rose, red and furious, with a long knife still clutched in one

hand, she knew she had been right. It was T. H. Hillock.

The rest was confused and hurried. Tom barking orders, Aurelia dazedly obeying. The police—Barney still in his bedroom slippers with his coat buttoned up wrong—arrived, and crowds of people sprang up out of the wet, deserted street.

Barney was shocked and incredulous. It took T. H.'s confession to convince him.

"I did it. I killed Fran. I—she was going to have a child. She wanted me to get a divorce. She threatened to tell my wife. I took the money as a blind. I—Aurelia, I really didn't want to hurt you. It was just . . . Oh, hell, Barney, let's get it over with."

Finally it was over, and Tom drove her to Mattie's. Mattie wept and kept patting Aurelia's arm, as if she couldn't quite believe it. Aurelia, drinking coffee and eating lemon tarts and watching the flames shoot up in the fireplace, could scarcely believe it herself.

Mattie said firmly, "Aury, I've got to know what you remembered."

"Oh, it was just that while I was sitting in Claude's office waiting I heard the *whoosh* of that doorclosing contraption on the outside door. No one came in, so it must have been someone going out. And I realized that when T. H. left I had heard the door click shut, but not the sound of the doorcloser. You can open it about an inch before it starts working, you know. He simply stayed in the hall until I left the room. Then he went in, killed Fran, hid the money, and left." She turned to the doctor. "I haven't thanked you, Tom, for saving my life. Or for making me go see Mrs. Quinn."

Tom shook his head admiringly. "You're quite a woman, Aurelia. You should have been a Christian martyr. The lions would have had tough going."

"Don't be absurd," she said sharply. "All I was doing was trying to show Barney that I had told the truth!"

Losers' Town

by Gary Brandner

The noisy old Convair was a far cry from the sleek jets that fly between Los Angeles and Las Vegas in a few air-conditioned minutes; but then, Saguaro, Nevada, was a far cry from Vegas.

This was the Weekender Fun Flight out of Long Beach, a package deal sponsored by the Valhalla Hotel in Saguaro. *Non-Stop Action!* was promised by the ads in the travel sections. If that wasn't enough, *Swimming-Golf-Tennis* were offered in smaller print. If there was a tennis player among the threadbare gamblers on this plane I'd eat my wallet.

I blended right in with the planeload of losers. At six feet four inches and two hundred forty pounds, I was bigger than the rest, but my busted face and cheap suit fit the pattern. What didn't fit was the .38 under my arm and the license in my pocket issued to D. Stonebreaker, Private Investigator.

The plane veered into a banking turn and the meager lights of Saguaro swung into view over the edge of the wing.

The town consisted of one neon-lit street with a few scattered dwellings on either side. The landing strip was left over from a World War II training field. As I said, a far cry from Vegas.

As it happened, a woman from Las Vegas was the reason I was about to land in Saguaro. When you think of a Las Vegas woman the picture you get is a six foot honey with legs to make you cry and a chest out to here. The one who came to my low-rent L.A. office earlier in the day would never be mistaken for a chorus girl. She was a washed-out blonde with tight lines in her face and no more figure than my coat rack. Her name was Lucille Colt.

She told me that her husband Ed had been a dealer at the Cartwheel Casino on the Vegas strip until six weeks ago; then he moved on to the Valhalla in Saguaro. Now he had disappeared.

"Something's happened to Ed," Lucille Colt said. "Something bad. I'm sure of it."

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"You know about the Cart-

wheel, don't you? About who owns it?"

"It's one of the syndicate joints, isn't it?"

"That's right. Naturally, there are other names registered as the owners, but everybody knows who runs it. What do you know about Saguaro, Mr. Stonebreaker?"

"Only that it's a town in the desert about two hundred miles north of Vegas."

"That's it," she said. "There isn't much there except the Valhalla Hotel, and the syndicate owns that, too. They've got special use for the Valhalla. That's why we call the place Losers' Town."

"Tell me about it."

"People who work in the syndicate casinos have to be super sharp. The tax boys and the gaming commission watch those places like vultures. And don't kid yourself, they know which ones the mob is into. Those casinos pay top dollar to their employees, but if you mess up and get fired, you're on a blacklist. For a dealer, that's as good as being dead. So if a guy makes a small mistake—not enough to fire him for, but too big to ignore—the syndicate gives him a chance to work it out in Losers' Town. They send him there for a month or six months or whatever, and if he stays clean at

the Valhalla he can come back to Vegas."

"Is that what happened to your husband?"

"Yes. A big winner one night at Ed's table turned out to be an old friend of his. The management couldn't prove Ed was dealing funny, but they were suspicious enough to ship him to Saguaro."

"You didn't go with him?"

"I couldn't. I've got two kids in school."

"You say this was six weeks ago?"

"About that. Then last week I got a letter back from the Valhalla where Ed had a room. It was marked *Moved—No Forwarding Address*. I called the Valhalla and talked to Bert Gettleman, he's the manager there. He told me Ed just packed up one night and pulled out. I don't believe it."

"Have you talked to the police?"

"Oh, sure, for about ten seconds. It seems husbands are bugging out on their wives every time you turn around, and the cops have more important things to worry about."

"Why did you come all the way to L.A. to hire a detective? There are some good men in Las Vegas."

"They may be good," she said, "but they aren't anxious to poke into the syndicate's

business. One of them, a man named Wilcox, told me to try you. He said you'd take on anything and wouldn't charge an arm and a leg."

Lucille Colt wrote out a check and gave me a photograph of her missing husband. Later, after verifying that her check was good, I caught the Weekender Fun Flight to the friendly town of Saguaro.

The Valhalla's version of limousine service from the airport was an ancient school bus. We rumbled into town where my fellow passengers swarmed out of the bus and into the casino. I hung back for a stroll along the main street before going inside to seek my fortune.

Aside from the five story Valhalla, there wasn't much—a couple of cafes, a movie house, a bowling alley, some dark store fronts, and three bars with poker games and pool tables. None of the lights in Saguaro was quite bright enough, as though the people who lived there did not want to look too closely at their town or at each other.

I walked back to the Valhalla and found it not much cheerier than the rest of the town. An air conditioner hammered away. The casino had the usual gambling layout—twenty-one, craps, roulette, keno—but the equipment looked like it had

been picked up secondhand. So did the employees.

At the far end of the casino was a bar with a raised stage behind it. On the stage a pair of middle-aged women in sequined dresses played the accordion and the drums. A bald man with a glass eye pounded on a piano, and the three of them sang constantly, their mouths stretched into smiles that never reached their eyes. Nobody at the bar or in the casino paid any attention to them.

I walked through the casino to the desk and registered for a room. The clerk gave me a single on the fifth floor. There was no bellhop in sight, so I carried my own bag up on the elevator. The room smelled of pine oil, and the window overlooked nothing but desert. I dropped the suitcase in a corner and headed back downstairs to sample the nonstop action.

From a weary-looking woman in a cage I bought a handful of dollar chips and wandered over to the crap table. I stayed about even for ten minutes, playing the pass line while I had a look around. The pit boss, a gray-haired individual with eyes like black agates, checked me out and didn't like what he saw.

When I got the dice, I sevened out on my second roll and

moved over to the blackjack table. There were only three players, one an obvious shill. I waited until the pale kid who was dealing broke a new deck before I said anything.

"A friend of mine is supposed to be dealing here. Ed Colt. You know him?"

The kid gave me a narrow look. "No."

"That's funny. He came to work here about six weeks ago."

"I'm new here." He moved his head half an inch toward the pit boss. "Maybe you better talk to Mr. Vetri."

At the sound of his name the pit boss slid over to our table. He had deep lines at the sides of his mouth. They were not laugh lines.

"Problem?" he asked without moving his lips.

"I was asking about one of your dealers," I said. "Ed Colt."

"Friend of yours?"

"That's right."

Vetri motioned me away from the table and out of the dealer's hearing. "Where do you know Colt from?"

"Vegas. I worked the bar at the Cartwheel for a while last year."

"If you came up here just to see Colt, you wasted a trip. He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Who knows? He lit out ten

days ago and told nobody nothing. Just packed his stuff and split."

"Got any idea why he left?"

Vetri let his eyes answer that one.

I nodded thanks and walked over to the bar. I ordered a bourbon on the rocks and tried to keep from staring at the grotesque trio on the stage.

Down the bar I noticed a sandy-haired guy in a cashmere jacket watching me. After a couple of minutes he picked up his drink and brought it over to where I was sitting.

"Having trouble with the pit boss?" he asked.

The guy had a healthy tan but tired eyes. Up close he looked older than he had at the other end of the bar.

I said, "No trouble. I was just asking about a friend of mine. You work here?"

"Not me," he said with an easy grin. "I'm the editor of what passes for a newspaper in this town, the *Weekly Gazette*. My name's Hal Fellows."

"Mine's Stonebreaker. What made you think I was having trouble with the pit boss?"

"The way he was looking at you—but then that's the way he usually looks. Are you from L.A.?"

"Yeah, does it show?"

"Only a little. I used to live there myself. Had to get out for

my lungs. I'd also guess you're a policeman, or used to be one."

"Used to be," I admitted. "You're pretty good."

"It's a hobby with me, guessing where people are from and what they do. If you were with the police maybe you recognized the pit boss, Mario Vetri."

Until then I hadn't, but the full name rang a bell. Mario Vetri had been a hard-nosed enforcer for the mob in Vegas, but he got his picture in the paper too many times. Now it looked like he was serving his stretch in Losers' Town.

"Is he somebody I should know?" I asked.

The editor lowered his voice. "He's a gangster. Or at least he was a gangster. Like everybody else in this dump, from the manager down to the bellhops."

"You're not crazy about the town," I said.

"The town would be all right if this cancerous Valhalla Hotel could be routed out. When I bought the *Gazette* five years ago, I thought Saguaro was a place where I could relax and enjoy the rest of my life. It wasn't long before I found out that the syndicate uses the Valhalla as a dumping ground for its human refuse. It poisons the whole town. At first I had some idealistic notions about being a crusading editor and going up

against the mob, but I soon learned I wasn't nearly tough enough. The hell of it is that they really don't seem to be doing anything against the law here."

"That's a dirty trick," I said. Fellows grinned wryly. "I didn't mean to bend your ear with our civic problems. Who's the friend you're looking for? Maybe I know the guy, or something about him."

"A dealer named Ed Colt." "Thin guy in his thirties? Blond hair, aviator glasses, mustache?"

"That's him." "I remember him, but I haven't seen him on the tables for a week or so. They come and go pretty fast here."

"I suppose so. As long as I'm here I might as well ask around a little more."

Fellows polished off his drink and stood up to leave. "Take care of yourself," he said. "If you get a chance, stop in at the *Gazette*, it's just across the street. Tell me about the smog and congestion in Los Angeles. I need a pep talk once in a while to remind me that Saguaro isn't so bad."

"Maybe I'll do that," I told him. I swallowed the rest of my bourbon and pushed the glass across the bar for a refill. Out in the casino the losers were dipping into the rent money,

and the smell of sweat was in the air.

"Hi, want some company?" The voice was sandpaper over velvet. The woman had soft dark hair and smoky eyes. She wore too much makeup and a dress that showed me her useful body. She might as well have worn a sign on her back.

"Not tonight," I told her, "unless you want to sit down for a drink."

Her eyes scanned the house professionally, and she eased onto the stool next to me. "Might as well," she said. "It looks like everybody's got their minds on gambling tonight."

I signaled the bartender and he poured her a glass of gin on the rocks—no frills like vermouth or olives.

The woman took a swallow and sighed with appreciation. "The breakfast of champions," she said. Then, looking me over, "You a cop?"

"Not any more," I said, "but you're the second one tonight to ask me. I feel like I've got a badge tattooed on my forehead."

"You've got the look," she said, then leaned closer and added, "but not quite."

"Thanks. I think."

"You can call me Toni."

"You can call me Stonebreaker. Who sicced you on me, Toni?"

Her eyes widened. "Nobody. Why should anybody sic me on you?"

"I was asking some questions. The management didn't act happy about it."

"You've been around the block," Toni said. "You should know that some cop-looking guy asking questions in a joint like this isn't going to win a popularity prize."

"I was asking about Ed Colt," I said. "He was a dealer here. You know him?"

Toni leaned back away from me.

"Mister, you just don't get the message. Asking questions in here isn't smart, but answering them can be hazardous to your health. I'll see you around, Stonebreaker." She walked quickly into the casino.

I dropped a couple of bills on the bar and strolled out of the hotel onto the main street. It was mostly dark now, except for the front of the Valhalla. The town looked less ugly by moonlight. I moved on down the block, then stopped to light a cigarette. I used the movement to glance back at the hotel entrance, where my shadow didn't quite get out of the way in time.

If somebody was concerned enough to put a tail on me, I figured there must be something in Losers' Town worth

finding. I strolled down one side of the street and back up the other without finding it. There wasn't much more I could do that night, so I went up to my room and went to bed.

In the late morning I woke up sweating from a dream of being roasted over a charcoal pit. Outside my window the desert shimmered in the heat. I staggered over and turned on the air conditioner, then risked pneumonia by letting it blow refrigerated air on me for several minutes before I went in and took a shower.

Before leaving the room I stuck a piece of Scotch tape across the seam where my suitcase opened. Not much of a trick by James Bond standards, but then I wasn't dealing with Goldfinger.

Downstairs in the casino only one crap table and one blackjack layout were operating. A handful of diehards from the Fun Flight were still at it, unshaven and sweat stained. The rest had either gotten a room like I did or taken advantage of the five-dollar cots provided by the management in a back room.

When I stepped out onto the street, the heat hit me like a fist. I walked half a block to the first cafe and went in for scrambled eggs and ham. The street was bare of pedestrians and

only one other customer was in the cafe. What life there was in Saguaro came out only at night.

After breakfast I walked back to the hotel and around to the rear to see what lay behind the building. In the center of a small patio was a swimming pool, somewhat larger than a bathtub, and dry as yesterday's toast. A layer of windblown sand gritted under my feet and stacked into little piles in the corner of the pool.

Beyond the patio the sun-baked ground sloped gently up and away for a few yards before ending in a surprising patch of green. I am no golfer, but it looked like there was enough fairway for a short approach shot and a green for putting. Sprinklers threw spirals of water out over the grass. Very inviting, except that the whole thing was surrounded by an eight foot steel mesh fence. There was a locked gate with a sun-faded sign that forbade trespassing.

There was a tennis court, too. This had no fence around it, but it had no net either, and there were wide cracks in the asphalt surface.

So much for the advertised outdoor activities.

I went back up to my room and found that the bed was made and the ashtrays were

emptied. A fresh set of towels hung in the bathroom, and the tape seal on my suitcase was broken. The contents were all there, only slightly rearranged. It might have been the work of a curious maid, but I didn't believe it. I took out my one change of clothes and didn't bother to replace the tape.

Half an hour later there was a businesslike rap at my door. I opened it to find a bellhop standing outside.

"Good morning, sir," the kid said, ignoring the fact that it was midafternoon. "Mr. Gentleman would like you to drop into his suite if you have time."

I had time, so I followed him down the hallway and around two corners to the manager's suite, where Bert Gentleman opened the door. He had a big square head with flat-combed gray hair and a dusting of talcum to cover his heavy beard.

"Glad you could come," he said.

"My pleasure," I answered, getting the social chatter out of the way.

Gentleman poured a glass of bourbon for me and some mineral water for himself. I sipped at the whisky and waited for him to say something.

"You're a private dick from L.A.," he informed me. "You're asking questions about one of my ex-dealers, Ed Colt. You're

working for his wife."

Gentleman waited for me to show I was impressed with his organization. When I didn't say anything, he went on.

"I guess by now you know my people don't like to answer questions. It's sort of an unwritten rule in this business, don't you know."

He smiled to show me there were no hard feelings. I didn't smile.

"But this time I'm going to break the rule myself and tell you what you want to know about Ed Colt. Because if I don't, you might get some very wrong ideas."

I tasted the man's bourbon and waited for him to go on.

"What happened was that Ed took off with a broad ten days ago. She was a cocktail waitress who'd only worked here about two weeks. Now, what my people do in their own time I could care less, but these two were playing kissy-face during working hours, and that doesn't go. I fired the broad and chewed Ed out real good. The next day they were both gone. When Ed's wife called me, I didn't want to tell her that her husband ran off with another woman. I don't like to get involved with those domestic things."

"What was the girl's name?" I asked.

"Barbara or Bitsy . . . something like that. I could look it up."

"It's not that important," I said.

Gentleman spread his hands and smiled again—just an honest, friendly businessman. "So that's it," he said. "In case you want to get started back, I know a man who's flying down to Vegas this afternoon. He'd be glad to take a passenger. Nobody knows better than me that Saguaro is not a real lively town."

"No, thanks," I told him. "I've got another day left on my Weekender Fun Package."

Gentleman's smile died on his face. "Whatever you say." He opened the door for me. I set down the glass with most of his whisky still in it and walked out.

Down in the casino, action was picking up as the Weekenders got their second wind. Mario Vetri was back in the pit. His black agate eyes followed me across the room to the hotel entrance.

I left the Valhalla and crossed the street to a storefront office with SAGUARO WEEKLY GAZETTE lettered in gilt across the window. Inside I found Hal Fellows hammering on an old typewriter. He was in shirtsleeves with a cold pipe stuck in his mouth and a pair

of half-glasses on his nose. He swiveled around and grinned when I walked in.

"Stonebreaker, glad to see you. I'll be with you in a minute, as soon as I finish this hardhitting editorial on wild-flowers."

While Fellows typed I looked around the room. It was cluttered, but in a clean way. At the rear, behind a low wooden barrier, stood a printing press. An old man was wiping it down with a rag.

After a minute Fellows yanked the sheet of copy paper out of his typewriter and dropped it into a box on his desk. He turned his chair around to face me and gestured me into another.

"How do you like our town so far?"

"About as well as your town likes me."

"Did you get what you came for?"

"Not exactly."

Fellows hitched his chair closer to mine. "Level with me, Stonebreaker, you're not in Saguaro just to look up an old friend, are you?"

"No," I admitted. "It never was much of a secret, so you might as well know too that I'm a private detective here on assignment."

"Are you after the Valhalla crowd?"

"Why do you ask that?"

He tossed a look at the old guy working on the press, then went on in a low, excited voice. "Because if you are, I can help. I've got material in my files that I once planned to use to clean up the town. That was before my fire burned out. I can see you've still got it—the fire. It's in your eyes. You and I working together could do a lot of good for Saguaro."

I held up a hand to stop him. "Hold it, Mr. Editor. I'm no town-tamer, I'm just a working man. I've got a job to do here for a client, and when it's done I'm finished with Saguaro. If the syndicate wants to use the Valhalla as a garbage dump, that's not my problem."

Fellows grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry. You'd think I'd be cured of playing reformer by now. Anyway, good luck to you. If there's any help I can give you . . ."

He let the sentence trail off, but I picked it up. "Do you know anything about a girl Ed Colt is supposed to have run off with? A cocktail waitress at the Valhalla?"

Fellows shook his head. "Sorry. Social news in the *Gazette* is strictly garden club meetings and rummage sales."

I told him goodbye then and left the newspaper office. All

the way across the street I could feel the editor's eyes on me. It was too bad, but the man he needed was John Wayne, not a low-rent private detective. I had problems of my own.

The rest of the afternoon I spent at a pay phone talking to some contacts of mine in Las Vegas. I learned that Bert Gettlemann had been in line to manage one of the syndicate's Strip hotels when he was indicted during a profit-skimming investigation. The case never went anywhere, but Gettlemann got himself on the bad list. They shipped him off to Losers' Town to think about his mistakes.

I went back to my room in Valhalla, and this time I found the same unmade bed and used towels I had left. My welcome was growing thin.

Back down at the casino I gambled for a while, losing steadily. Figuring I would get more for my money in the bar, I picked up the chips I had left and carried them over to the cage to cash in. From the corner of my eye I saw Mario Vetri put somebody else in charge of the pit and head for the elevator.

While I counted my money, a tall, pale woman walked across the room toward the bar. Her dark hair was pulled tightly back, and her eyes were invisible behind purple shades.

Something about her was familiar, and after a minute I recognized her as Toni, my gin-drinking pal of the night before without her high-gloss paint job. I stuck the bills into my pocket and ambled over to join her.

She was at the bar with a glass of gin already in front of her when I got there.

"Hello, Toni. Want some company?"

"Sorry," she said without looking at me, "we're closed."

"For tonight or for good?"

She turned and looked at me then. Clearly, the gin in front of her was not Toni's first of the day. "Oh-ho, it's my friend Stonebreaker who looks like a cop but isn't. He says, Any more. Hello, Stonebreaker. Since you ask, I'm out of business. Finished. Kaput."

"What happened?"

"What happened is that Gentleman decided that I am no longer welcome in his establishment. Since this is the only establishment in town, that means I am no longer welcome in Saguaro. Where is there to go, Stonebreaker, when they run you out of Losers' Town?"

"I don't know, Toni. What was Gentleman's beef?"

"Beef? Mr. Gentleman doesn't need any beef. When he says you go, you go. I have a teeny suspicion it has to do

with me talking to you last night. Then again, maybe he just doesn't like the way I look. Do you like the way I look, Stonebreaker?"

She pulled off the shades and cocked her head so the light from the backbar fell on her. The years of night-living were written on her face. Still, the bones were good and I could see she must have been a beauty once. "Well?" she said. "You haven't told me what you think."

"Your hair was better the way you had it last night."

She reached up and pulled out a couple of pins, shaking her head to let the long, dark hair float around her face. "Like this?"

"Much better."

Toni laughed. "You're not as mean as you look, Stonebreaker. Buy me a drink?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. You know, I've got until midnight when my bus leaves. Interested?"

"Never while I'm working," I told her.

She laughed again. "I don't believe you, but it's a nice gentle turndown, anyway."

I said, "Listen, Toni, as long as you don't work here any more, is there anything you can tell me now about Ed Colt?"

"Your friend?" she said, watching my face.

"Not really. I was hired to find out what happened to him. Gentleman gave me a story, but I'm not happy with it."

Toni sucked on her lip for a moment, then made a decision. "I guess they can't do anything to me now for talking to you, can they? You'll be around until midnight?"

"I'll be around."

She stood up and crooked a finger at me. "Come on, then, and I'll show you something."

We walked through the casino, crowded now with gamblers. Vetri's replacement in the pit was having a low-key argument with a couple of the people from my Fun Flight. Toni led me to the far wall and through a door that was hidden behind heavy velvet draperies. I followed her down a dim hallway where exposed pipes ran along the concrete walls. We came to a heavy metal door, and Toni leaned on the brass bar and pushed it open.

"Where are we?" I said.

She put a finger to her lips. "Sh! Back door."

Toni stepped outside. I started after her, but barely got through the door when something rapped me behind the right ear.

I went down and almost out. My strength was gone, and all around me was a blur of movement and jumbled voices.

There were at least two of them—big, tough, professional. While I struggled to let some light into my brain, one of them lifted my gun, and I was dragged into the back seat of a car. One of them drove us out of town while the other sat in the back with a .45 jammed into my liver. After a while we turned off onto a dirt road.

When we had driven maybe ten miles in silence, I asked, "Am I supposed to know you?"

The one with the gun said, "Shut up. I don't really want to kill you, but if you get cute, I will. Believe me."

I believed him. I also shut up.

In a barren patch of moonlit desert the car came to a stop. The driver said, "Get out."

I got out.

"Straight ahead is a town called Tucker. Back the way we came is Saguaro. It's your choice from here, but if it was me I would put all the desert I could between me and Losers' Town."

The door slammed shut and the car made a U-turn and sped away, laying out a trail of silver dust in the moonlight.

I sat down in the road and rubbed my head. The numbness was wearing off, and it was starting to hurt. It would get worse. I wondered if Toni had got her job back for delivering me to the strongarm

squad. I wondered if she had ever lost her job. While I was wondering these things a pair of headlights came toward me from the direction of Saguaro. I ran to the side of the road and flopped behind a barrel cactus in case my playmates were coming back.

The car came on very slowly. Somebody was leaning from the window, shouting, "Stone-breaker, are you out there? It's me, Hal Fellows."

I stood up and waved. A dusty new Mercedes pulled to a stop and the editor of the *Gazette* jumped out to meet me.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah. A little headache is all. What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might be in trouble. I was coming into the Valhalla just as you walked through the casino with the girl and went out the hidden door. Vetri called a couple of hoods over and sent them hurrying out the front. I followed and saw them run around to the back of the building. I stayed out of sight, and in a couple of minutes the two of them dragged you out to a car and took off. I drove out of town behind them and parked where this road turns off the highway. When they came back I could see there were just the two of them in the car, so I came looking for you on the double."

"I'm glad you did, but isn't it a little out of your way?"

"I just figured it was about time I showed some guts. I was ashamed of myself for trying to drag you into our mess. You're right, it's not your problem. If the Valhalla crowd is going to be cleaned out of Saguaro, it's up to me and the other people who live there."

"I'll buy that," I said. "How about a ride back to town?"

"You're going back to Saguaro?"

"Sure. There are some things that belong to me back in Losers' Town."

Fellows' grin showed white in the moonlight. "Let's go," he said.

I settled into the seat beside him. "Did they work you over?" Fellows asked.

"No, just a kiss with a blackjack to persuade me to come along. They sort of hinted that it might get rougher if I showed up back in town."

"Do you want to stop and report it to the sheriff?"

"You've got a sheriff?"

Fellows made a sound in the back of his throat. "Oh, yes, we have a sheriff. His name is Lou Tatto, and he does a pretty good job as long as he doesn't have to step on any toes at the Valhalla."

"You mean he's on their payroll?"

"I couldn't prove it, but he and Gentleman eat lunch together a lot."

"Then forget the sheriff and drop me at the hotel."

"I still wish we could work together, Stonebreaker," he said.

"I work best alone," I told him.

"And you still say all you're interested in is finding out what happened to Ed Colt?"

"That's it. Like I told you, I'm no town-tamer; I'm just a private detective doing a job for a client. When my job is done I say goodbye to Losers' Town, and you people can do whatever you want about the Valhalla."

Fellows didn't look like he believed me, but that was the end of the conversation. He dropped me in front of the hotel and drove on down the street.

I went inside, but only long enough to get some change from the cashier. I was getting a whole new idea about who was what in Losers' Town.

I walked back to the pay phone and called the state police in Hawthorne, about fifty miles away. They were skeptical of my story, but I told them to check me out with the head of the homicide division of the L.A.P.D. They agreed reluctantly, and said they would act on what he told them. I hoped Captain Williams would come through. We had our differ-

ences while I was with the department, but he knew that I didn't get hysterical.

I headed back for the Valhalla, planning to retrace the path Toni had led me on earlier. Now I was not so sure that she had set me up for the sap, and I was curious about what she wanted to show me.

As I started in the front door, a car with flashing red lights and a sheriff's star on the door barreled past and wheeled around the corner toward the rear of the hotel. I jogged after it.

When I got there, the dry swimming pool was lit up by floodlights. A tall man in tailored khakis and a roll-brim Stetson jumped out of the car and took charge. As I approached, he walked down the steps into the shallow end of the pool. I moved through the small crowd of hotel employees and guests to a spot where I could see the action. The sheriff walked down the sloping bottom to the deep end of the pool where another man knelt beside the body of a woman. The woman lay on her stomach with her head twisted around to face over her shoulder. It was Toni, and even from where I stood, I could see that she was dead.

The sheriff talked briefly with the other man, then

walked back to the shallow end and came up the steps.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Who are you?" The sheriff had a thin, oblong face with high Indian cheekbones.

"My name is Stonebreaker. I'm staying at the hotel."

"Do you know the dead woman?"

"Only slightly. I was with her a couple of hours ago."

"I see. Well, it looks like she got drunk and staggered off the edge of the pool. Broke her neck."

I looked over my shoulder at the rear door of the hotel where I got sapped earlier. Then I looked back at the swimming pool. "Is that the way it looks to you, sheriff?"

"I just told you so. You think different?"

"Maybe." Sensing movement behind me, I looked around and saw Gettlemann and Vetri herding people back inside the hotel. Then they turned and marched toward the sheriff and me. The pit boss carried one hand in his coat pocket in a way I didn't like at all.

The sheriff watched them come, too. I wasn't at all sure of the man, but he was the only representative of law and order on the scene.

"It was no accident that killed Toni," I said, talking low and fast.

"Is that so?"

Before I could say more the other two joined us. "Well, Stonebreaker, I see you've met Sheriff Tatto," Gettlemann said.

The sheriff spoke up before I could answer. "Hello, Mr. Gettlemann. This fella says he has some ideas about what happened here."

"Is that so? Let's hear them."

I took a deep breath and started talking. "If you look around, you'll see there's a fine coating of sand over the bricks all around the pool. It's all scuffed up with footprints here where we are, but not down at the other end where Toni is supposed to have fallen in. Nobody walked on that edge of the pool tonight."

"So?" The sheriff looked at me with new interest. Behind me Gettlemann and Vetri stirred uneasily.

"So if you ask me, I'd say somebody twisted her neck down at this end, maybe over by that door, and dragged her down the steps and across the bottom of the pool to where she was found."

Gettlemann said, "Why would anyone want to kill Toni? She was just a harmless hustler."

"Maybe not so harmless," I said. "She was bringing me out here to show me something tonight, something I wasn't supposed to see. We got as far as

that door when I was rapped with a blackjack. Two hoods drove me out and dumped me in the desert. Somebody stayed behind and made sure Toni wouldn't do any more talking."

"Stonebreaker, you've got quite an imagination," the manager said. "Too bad you never got to see what Toni wanted to show you. Then the sheriff might have something to go on."

Sheriff Tattu looked from me to Gentleman and back again. I couldn't read what thoughts lay behind the Indian eyes.

"Toni never got to show me," I said, directing my answer to the sheriff, "but I think I know what it was. When I first came out here, I should have wondered why the swimming pool and tennis court are falling to pieces while that one-hole golf course is kept watered and green and locked away from anybody who might want to use it for golf. And if it wasn't used for golf, what was a patch of soft earth used for in this hardpan country? And how did it fit in with the missing dealer, Ed Colt?"

"I'll bet, sheriff, that if you start digging in that so-called golf course you'll soon turn up the body of Ed Colt, maybe a few others. If a man messes up in Losers' Town, there's no place left to send him."

Sheriff Tattu had listened to me in silence, watching my face impassively. Now he said, "And who is it that's been doing all this killing and burying?"

"Mario Vetri was a triggerman in Las Vegas," I said. "It's likely he's been doing the same job here. On orders from Bert Gentleman."

"What about that, Mr. Gentleman?" the sheriff said.

"We've heard enough, Lou. Mario, since our friend is so interested in the golf course, why don't you take him in for a closer look."

Vetri pulled his hand out of the pocket—it was wrapped around the butt of a pistol. I knew when I started that trusting the sheriff was a long shot, but it was the only play I had. Now it looked like all I had bought was a couple more minutes of being alive.

"Let's go," Vetri said, nudging me toward the gate. "Ed Colt made the mistake of trying to beat the game in Losers' Town. I thought you were smarter than that."

He didn't let me get close enough to make a try for the gun. Professionals don't do that. Gentleman and his sheriff walked away from us toward the street.

As Vetri unlocked the gate a blaze of headlights hit the scene. The four of us

froze—Tatto and Gettleman near the street, Vetri and me at the gate—as two Nevada state policemen jumped out of their car, shotguns ready.

"Which one of you is Stonebreaker?" one of them barked.

"That's me," I said, moving away from Vetri's pistol.

For a minute or so everybody talked at once, but as soon as I convinced the state policemen to poke around in the golf course, the game was over.

By the next morning four bodies, including Ed Colt's, had been dug up from under the nice green sod, and it looked like there were more to come. The Valhalla was swarming with policemen and reporters. In the casino the Weekenders who still had some cash were pumping it into the slot machines, since the tables were closed.

I sat in the bar having coffee with the two state policemen who had arrived first on the scene. "I don't remember if I mentioned it," I said, "but I want to thank you guys for not showing up five minutes later."

"You can thank Captain Williams of L.A. Homicide that we showed up at all," one of them said. "He told us you were an insubordinate hard-nosed troublemaker, but if you told us the sky was falling we'd better reach for a hard hat."

Over at the hotel entrance Hal Fellows came in and talked shortly with the policeman on duty there. Then he strode over to the table where I sat with the two patrolmen.

"Stonebreaker, you son of a gun," he said with a big grin. "I just heard what happened. Gettleman and Vetri are down at the courthouse now spilling their insides to the state's attorney. You turned out to be a town-tamer after all, didn't you?"

"It wasn't on purpose," I said, "but as long as it worked out that way, I might as well clean up the last detail and name the man who killed Toni."

"But Vetri's already in custody," Fellows said.

"Vetri has killings enough to answer for, but Toni's isn't one of them. You see, he was not in the pit when I walked out with the girl last night. I saw him leave before I even talked to Toni. It was somebody else who saw Toni lead me out and guessed where she was taking me. That somebody fingered me for the two hoods, then went out back to give them further instructions. Since Toni saw him, he couldn't let her live. He broke her neck and dragged her into the pool where he did a poor job of making it look like an accident. Then he got worried about whether I had really

got the message from the strong arm team, so he drove out to the desert to see."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Fellows asked.

"I'm saying you killed her, yes. It figured that the syndicate would want somebody here they could trust to keep an eye on the Valhalla and all the losers they had staffing the place. Nobody here, not even Gentleman, knew you were the watchdog."

The two state policemen were watching Fellows intently. The editor seemed to shrink a little as he stood there.

"Your cover here was a good one," I said. "As editor of the

local paper you could go anywhere without arousing suspicion. I thought, though, that you dressed a little too rich and drove a pretty expensive car for the editor of a desert weekly. Then, when you showed up so conveniently after your hoods had dumped me, I knew your story was false and you weren't what you pretended."

"You'll have a hard time proving any of that."

"Like I told you once before, Mr. Fellows, that's not my problem."

I excused myself and went up to shower and pack. I didn't want to miss the Weekender Fun Flight back to L.A.

Cop at the Wash

by Jas. R. Petrin

Munder is one thing," Mrs. Aird complained, "but your hair falling out, that's something else." Evelyn Culver smeared another long streak of Special Formula into her hard-of-hearing client's graying strands and massaged it into the scalp with firm fingertips.

An impatient voice called from the Easy-Clip waiting room, "We can't wait around here till *our* hair falls out!" Nathan Tate had very short hair; his father was bald on top but made up for it with a heavy fringe that wrapped round his head like a string mop. But they both needed haircuts.

"Who the heck's out there?" hissed Mrs. Aird. She'd heard the voice but not the words. "I don't need the whole world knowing my problem."

"He didn't hear," Evelyn reassured her. "Only thought he did." And she hollered back over the partition wall, "Keep your shirt on. Dianne's coming. I only got two hands." She pulled the drop sheet off Mrs. Aird with an irritated flourish. "There, that'll keep you till next time."

"You chasing me out with my hair still wet?"

"That's how the Special Formula works best, dear. Keep dabbing it on all day. Trust me." She took the money Mrs. Aird gave her. "And you can slip out the side door there and beat it down Beach Street if you want, and avoid them roughnecks out front."

"What?"

"I said—"

"Think I'll go out the side door," the older woman grumbled. "Men in the beauty parlor! What next? French poodles for a clip? I just don't know."

Leaving the shop, she was almost bowled over by Dianne Freely, coming in through the door at a run. Dianne threw her handbag down breathlessly.

"Sorry I'm late. We got customers waiting?"

Evelyn jerked her head at the waiting room; she found it hard to stay cross at Dianne. "Only a couple of wild men, wanting a

haircut or a fight. They'll be shooting bullets in a minute. Those Tates." She turned and hollered, "Next!"

"Stabbed or shot, somebody in this town's a killer, that's all I know about it. A touch more off the top 'n' sides, Mr. Tate?"

Evelyn slapped her scissors down and snatched up a hand mirror, showing Nathan Tate what the back of his cannonball head looked like.

"A few more snips," Tate said. He was a man in his thirties. He had a small, clever mouth. He was a security guard who lived with his dad by the lake. He liked guns. "We can't afford to come here every week, you know. And why couldn't it of been somebody from a whole other town, sneakin' out there to the Wash and perpetratin' that crime?"

"Why not somebody from a whole other country?" Dianne Freely's voice chimed in sarcastically from the other cubicle, where she was giving Tate Senior a trim at the fringe that was all he had left. They could hear her chewing lustily at a wad of gum, making it crackle and pop. She was new at the Easy-Clip, and young, and her fringe trimmer whirred. "Why not somebody from a whole other world?"

It might as well have been.

No one had any idea who had actually shot the strange man in the strange car out at the Wash, a bluff that overlooked the lake, a picturesque lover's lookout sort of place where local couples had found love and romance over the years—and where one strange couple had found violence. The man had died instantly, the woman with him was wounded. Nobody knew who they were.

Evelyn banged the mirror down and grabbed her scissors again. She didn't like customers telling her they wanted more off the sides, or more off the top, or more off anywhere else; she only asked as a matter of form and felt they ought to realize that. She pinched a tuft of Mr. Tate's damp hair out from his head so that it stood up like a devil's horn, gave it a yank, and snipped it.

"Hey!" barked Nathan Tate. "That hurts."

"No, it don't," said Evelyn. "And if you want it short, then I got to dig in deep and go after it, don't I? And how come you or your father didn't hear that attack, only a whoop and a loud yell down the road from your place, quiet night, windows open, boom! boom! Fourth of July?"

"Well, we didn't," Nathan Tate replied with the quick invective

COP AT THE WASH



THIN STARLIGHT OVER THE PINES REVEALED A SANDY ROAD LEADING
DEEPER INTO THE TREES.

of a man who's answered an infuriating question as many times as he's going to. "And we don't keep our windows open on account of the usual racket."

"What usual racket?"

"Watch your hands!" Dianne snapped at Mr. Tate Senior.

"Motors racing, doors slamming, laughing, giggling—all that lover's lane nonsense. Me and Dad want to put a stop to *that*, I can tell you."

Evelyn flicked the excess water out of her comb, shooting a wet streak splang across the front page of the Netley *Leader* she had propped up earlier by the mirror, a blotch on a headline that blared WASH ATROCITY—POLICE NET CLOSES. "Says there in the paper the police are putting a stop to it for you. Says they know it's somebody from here in Ponemah—or maybe Matlock, or Sans Souci. Or maybe even End of Main. Says they pretty near got the killer half in jail already."

"Hah!" sang out Dianne Freely over the partition. "Or maybe Grand Forks, or maybe Minneapolis—hold still, for heaven's sake, want me to snip your ears off? I swear, Mr. Tate, your father's got ears like a Ubangi warrior, they just keep popping up and won't quit. Our police'll be the last to know who the killer is, wait and see."

Evelyn snorted.

"Don't get after the Ubangi warriors. I dunno what the Ubangi warriors ever did to you. And they don't have big ears, they got big something elses, I forget what. You're only mad at the police because of your fight with Marvin." Evelyn snipped, and a shower of wet hair trimmings rained down on the sheet that tented the grimacing Nathan Tate: he looked like an angry choirmaster. "Marvin Unger," she explained to the back of Tate's head, "that new, young policeman with the dimples that don't quit? One they hired from the city, as if we don't have dimples right here?" She sniffed. "Dianne had a row with him over Tom Cruise at the Movie-Time Videos and got mad and ran home mad as a splashed cat. *I* got faith in the police."

"Easy," growled Nathan, "on those sideburns."

"Sideburns? You're not Elvis Presley, are you? Back from the afterworld again?"

"My argument with Marvin had nothing to do with that **murder**, one way or the other," Dianne asserted. Her denial came over the partition in words like ice cubes tossed from a dish. "I just go by

the facts. A person killed, a person wounded, two days gone, and the police are getting their net out? Good grief. If they worked the Gimli boats we'd never see a fishburger again, that's all I know. They got no experience with murder. Which is what I told Marvin. I said they should hire somebody who does."

"They could hire Tom Cruise," said Evelyn in an evil undertone, and she chortled silently over Nathan Tate in washes of mint-scented breath. She added more loudly: "That where you and Marvin go, Dianne? Out to the Wash on a moonlit night?"

"What's wrong with that? *Mister Tate*—I told you to keep your hands to yourself! Now, what was I saying? Oh yeah. Maybe I'll call Marvin up and suggest we go out there tonight, just us two, and look at the lake, and talk and clear up our differences."

"Talk," said Nathan Tate, "at the Wash. Huh!"

But Evelyn had been chilled by Dianne's words. She held Nathan Tate's head at a cruel angle by a tight pinch of hair. "You do? I mean, you will? What the heck d'you want to go out there for?"

"What a question. Same reason everybody does. Ask Nathan, there." She added in a voice rich with intimation, "Or maybe you don't have to. I bet you spent half your own life, Evelyn, in some car out at the Wash."

"Wrong. Totally wrong. And if I did, it's not the same thing at all." Evelyn gazed over Nathan's head at her generously powdered face in the mirror. "Things were better then. Gentler. Your moon on the water . . . your Perry Como on the radio . . . best days of my life."

"Perry Como?" Dianne's gum snapped like a pistol shot. "You listened to Perry Como? My God! I'd rather sit here and listen to the fan go around."

"He was romantic. Not like *your* music. That rap! . . . like someone kicking the back of your seat at a movie. And when we went out to the Wash, we didn't have to worry about getting stabbed or shot." To Evelyn, a fatal stabbing or fatal shooting were interchangeable; after all, the result was the same. "Only thing stabbed us was the mosquitoes."

Nathan Tate yelped. "Watch them scissors!"

"Calm down," Evelyn told him. "You don't think I'm the murderer, do you?" She yanked the dropcloth off with a snap that sent hair clippings flying. "There. That's the best haircut you ever had. Should charge you twice. I cut it twice."

"You shouldn't even charge me once," Nathan Tate growled. He

glared angrily into the mirror. "Look at that! Nicks all over my head! Like Sam Snead was teeing off up there. If I'd of wanted scalping, I'd of gone to Joe Passwa, he's a full-blooded Cree . . ."

"It was the French invented scalping," Dianne Freely chimed in, appearing around the end of the partition. She knew all the haircutting lore. Nathan's dad hobbled behind her like a forgotten man, his bushy white fringe looking no shorter than when he hobbled in, and his eyes were on everything she had. Dianne was a pretty, pert thing, with a pile of blonde curls on her head and a spring in her step. "Now, Evelyn here—she's French."

"That explains it then," Nathan snapped. He bent sharply at the waist to let his father, a shorter man, view his head. "Lookit this!"

Evelyn rang up two haircuts. "Cut it close, you said. So I did. Won't need no hair gel. Just a rubdown of carnauba wax. Eighteen dollars—plus tax."

"Tax on a haircut!" Nathan slapped a twenty on the counter. "I'll cut my own from now on. Do a better job, too."

"Or go down to the Wash," suggested Evelyn. "Hand the killer a knife, get a haircut that'll never grow back. Right, Dianne?"

"That's right. Have to open your shirt to find something to comb, after that."

"I dunno why I come in this place." Nathan steered his father to the door. "The Easy-Clip! It's a clip-joint all right, but there's nothing easy about it. Beats me how you stay in business."

"It's our pretty faces," Evelyn yelled. And she made a grimace at the slamming door, winked at Dianne, and sank down in a chair and fanned herself with a magazine. "Whew! This job. These customers. What we got to put up with to make a living." She said with concern, "You didn't mean what you said about going out there tonight? I mean, you wouldn't actually, would you, considering what's going on . . ."

Dianne Freely reached for a *Modern Bride*. "Don't worry about me. You're forgetting Marvin's a policeman."

"You didn't put a whole lot of faith in policemen a minute ago."

"We were talking about *investigating*. I only told Marvin his pals don't know the first thing about that."

"Pooh. What's to know? Investigating is easy. Just ask questions till you come to the answer. Anyone could do it. I could do it."

"You? Investigate a mystery? Oh, please! Give me a break. The only mystery we ever had is why Mrs. Aird's hair keeps falling out, and you haven't come close to solving that one yet."

"I'm working on it."

"At least policemen are big and strong—and cute in their uniforms. They got guns and know how to protect a person."

"They didn't protect those two the other night."

"No. But those two didn't have a policeman in their car with them, did they?"

"I suppose not," said Evelyn. She sat somberly for a moment, then reached out and brushed Dianne's perky curls out of her eyes. "If you're determined to make up with Marvin, and you got to do it tonight, then you better let me do something with this raggedy mop of yours. Climb up into that chair."

Dianne climbed.

"Why don't you get a date and come with us, Evelyn?"

"Me? I'm too old. And I want to get older. And there's no Perry Como. And I got my flower class every second Tuesday, don't I?"

Usually a keen participant, Evelyn sat at the back of her flower class and saw but didn't see the slides flicker and blink over other people's heads. She couldn't think about flowers. They made her think of Kroek's Funeral Home. Dianne out there at the Wash with a killer creeping up on her. It nearly made her sick with worry, and she almost leaped straight into the air when Mrs. Aird, her hair all patchy and wet, slid into the seat beside her and poked her in the ribs.

"Heard the latest on that murder?"

The slide changed with a click, and a four foot yellow blossom burst onto the screen like a golden explosion. Mr. Provost smacked it aggressively with his telescopic pointer and hollered as if they were gathered on some windy hilltop: "In Turkestan—" *whack!* "—we find ourselves in the homeland of this delicate delight—" *whack!* "—*Crocus korolkowii* . . ."

"You mean about the shooting?"

"What?"

"THE SHOOTING?"

"Hooting? I don't hear no hooting. I mean the murder. You know. Blam." Mrs. Aird pressed the tip of one finger against the side of Evelyn's head when she said this, as if she were carrying out a ritual execution. "Ask me who did it, I'd have to jump up and say it was the Mafia."

Evelyn sniffed. "The Mafia? Good grief! What would the Mafia come here for—to corner the fish market?"

"—gay yellow flowers, delicately veined with purple, here and here—" *Whack! Whack!*

"They say there were brains all over the inside of the car. Can you imagine it? Brains," Mrs. Aird repeated, shaking her head as if the concept needed emphasis, "just dripping!"

"—and from this cradled ovary, at the base of the floral tube, the fruit is borne upwards on this splendid pedestal . . ."

"An awful mess," Mrs. Aird blathered loudly. "No wonder the police kept their mouths shut all this time. It's the newspaper made them tell about the weapon. A .38, they admitted, what the police use themselves."

The carousel clicked. "And the most gorgeous of all *Crocus korolkowii* irises are those gathered under the *Oncocyculus* section. Admired for millennia, cultivated by pharaohs . . ."

"Brains," said Mrs. Aird loudly. "Gah! All dripping down the windows!"

"Dianne Freely went out there tonight," Evelyn said worriedly. "I told her not to."

"Never get 'em off, those brains."

". . . delicate petals . . ."

"I know I shouldn't worry about her, but she's almost, you know, a sort of daughter. My protecting her is, well, it's almost some sort of a reflex . . ."

"Windex?" Mrs. Aird shook her head. "Nope. Windex won't do it. You'd need a scraper."

"—and here—" *whack!* "—are a number of other beautiful irises, all subtly unique in their rich and real hues . . ."

"Want the *real* mystery?" Mrs. Aird asked. "My niece—not the one in Phoenix, but the one out at the hospital—she says the female victim, when she finally popped her eyes open, gave a yell and yanked the call button clean out of the wall, and started in hollering, 'HELP! POLICE! POLICE!'—like that . . ."

Mrs. Aird's own hollering rang out through the room.

Mr. Provost lowered his pointer. Heads swiveled. Faces gazed blankly at the back row. Like a crowd at a carnival midway, caught between two barkers, wondering who had the better act.

"Pardon us," Evelyn said.

Mr. Provost gave them a disgusted look, cleared his throat, and took up his monologue again. A map filled the screen. "Turkestan is noted here, here, and here—" *whack! whack! whack!* he struck the screen viciously "—for its pockets of splendid *Oncocyculus* . . ."

"She hollered *police*, that's what she hollered."

"Naturally," said Evelyn, searching for an explanation other than the one that was forming up in the back of her worried mind. "Who wouldn't want the police after an experience like—"

Mrs. Aird's mouth opened with a little dry pop. "No. Listen. Not like she wanted the police. More like she *didn't* want the police. Like she was *scared to death* of the police, is how my niece explained it—and she was *there*." She rattled the newspaper. "It don't say nothing about that in here."

Evelyn watched the glowing hues of *Oncocyclus*. But she was thinking about .38 caliber police revolvers, and victims who woke up screaming at the sight of policemen. About Dianne Freely. Dimpled young officers . . .

"I told Dianne I could solve this mystery," said Evelyn, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "And now I'm beginning to think I *got* to solve this mystery! Know what I'm trying to say?"

"Just running down the window," muttered Mrs. Aird.

When Evelyn spoke again, she found she had both her hands clenched into fists.

"Mrs. Aird, you don't have your car here, do you?"

“You mean to say you think it could of been Dianne's new boyfriend committed that wild attack?" They were trundling out of town toward the Wash in Mrs. Aird's old car. "But why would a—a *policeman* want to go and do a thing like that?"

"I don't know."

The exact route to the Wash was unclear in their minds; they had a hard time remembering where the turnoff was. But it was somewhere out here on the Sans Souci road.

"All I know is, we never had no murders at Ponemah before. Then he arrives from the city—Murder City—and boom!"

"That's all they do in the city," Mrs. Aird said, "is murder people. Every day. All the time."

Mrs. Aird had pulled three U-turns on the darkened road, and was starting to get annoyed when Evelyn finally spotted the tree.

"That's it! That elm! Struck by lightning! See it? Turn!"

Mrs. Aird braked and jerked the wheel so hard the car almost rolled over. It left the asphalt, slewed eerily, then struck the muddy shoulder. A frantic drubbing noise broke out as clods of earth flew up at the floorboards. The women squealed. Mrs. Aird spun the

wheel again. The car sailed grandly into the ditch, lurched once, stopped, then immediately began sinking as if settling in for a long hibernation.

"Ahh! Ahh! My car! My car!" shrieked Mrs. Aird.

"Dianne! Dianne!" Evelyn yelled.

It was so dark they could scarcely see. Evelyn put her snow-white Reeboks out into the mud and slogged up the bank to the road. There was a keen breeze, and she hitched her sweater tighter around herself. What she wouldn't do to save Dianne Freely's life! How much farther to the Wash? A hundred yards? A mile? She couldn't remember. Somewhere along this road, though, was the shack Nathan Tate shared with his father, and she wondered if she couldn't get Nathan to help her.

He'd resist, of course; he wasn't the helpful type. But Evelyn was determined to make him cooperate. Even if she had to put another divot in his scalp.

Mrs. Aird was trying to climb the bank. She wore slip-on shoes that skidded, and it seemed she might spend the night there before Evelyn caught her hand and hauled her up to the road. They glanced around them. Thin starlight over the pines revealed a sandy road leading deeper into the trees. As if for courage, Mrs. Aird brought out a bottle of Special Formula and rubbed some into her hair.

Evelyn whispered her plan.

"What?"

Evelyn shouted her plan.

Mrs. Aird looked doubtfully back at the ditch. One hearing aid whistled mournfully.

"And they'll rescue my car before it sinks down to China?"

"I'm sure they will."

Mrs. Aird started walking. "Let's hurry. I don't want no car that's been to China and back. Think of the mileage."

The road almost disappeared when the treetops closed overhead. Mrs. Aird spoke worriedly of bears. But after a few minutes' walking they found the Tate place: deep ruts led up to the steps from Nathan's frequent excursions. A light was on. Tate Senior answered the door.

His face lit up. "Women!" he said, as if he'd spent the last thirty years in a monastery. And he pulled them into the house by the elbows.

He was as sweet as could be, showing Mrs. Aird to the phone, cackling and steering her along; he was all hands. That done, he turned and suddenly recognized Evelyn, stepped back a pace, and raised his hands to his moplike fringe protectively.

"Where's Nathan?" Evelyn asked.

The old man kept his distance. "Out."

"This is an emergency. When will he be back?"

"I dunno."

In the kitchen, Mrs. Aird was having little success also. She dialed the garage at Sans Souci, and the ones at Ponemah and Matlock, but they were closed; now she dialed Al's Gas-O-Hol in her own town, End of Main.

The old man went in and slipped an arm around her waist.

"You could wait with me here for Nathan. He'll pull you out," Mr. Tate said smoothly.

Nathan's truck was standing in the driveway. Evelyn had seen it when they knocked on the door. She supposed Nathan himself must be traipsing around in the woods someplace, and she shivered. Didn't he care there was a killer on the loose?

"Does Nathan keep a gun?" she asked.

The old man blinked. "Does a bear poop in the woods?"

"Does he have one with him now?"

"I dunno."

"Can you find out?"

She followed him to an adjoining room, where he switched on the light with a pull-chain. The room's contents took Evelyn's breath away. Nathan had a gun, all right. He had a lot of guns. Shotguns in racks. Rifles—bolt action and semi-automatic—standing in soldierly rows. And handguns. Lots of them. Large ones, small ones, revolvers and automatics. Even ones with scopes mounted on them, like ugly, truncated rifles.

"Don't worry about Nathan," the old man said, grinning. He'll be fine with his S and W."

"S and W?"

The old man pointed to a gap in one long, symmetrical row of polished revolvers. "His Smith. Smith and Wesson. Man's gun. Blow your head off." He gave an appraising look at Evelyn's own head and nodded, as if this might be especially true in her case.

"Drop over sometime when Nathan's away. I'll give you a shooting lesson."

"I bet you will," said Evelyn. "Listen. I want you to take me to

Nathan." Mrs. Aird wandered in, discouraged, from the phone, and Tate Senior took both women by the hand. "Ain't you tired?" he said. "I am. Whyn't we wait for him, us three all lie down an' have a little nap?"

Evelyn jerked her hand away. "Take me to him. Now!"

"All right, all right, don't get nasty." He picked up a jacket and shouldered it on. The cuffs reached nearly to his fingertips. "I'll help you find him."

"Don't that jacket belong to him?" Evelyn asked. It was a blue uniform jacket, gabardine, the sort that came with matching trousers. A shoulder flash read KING SECURITY.

"He don't mind," explained Tate. And running an appraising eye from both women's toes all the way up and down again, said, "Anybody tell you, you're both awful fine figures of a woman?"

Mrs. Aird wouldn't wait at the house. "With a murderer around? Not on your Nelly." Tate Senior was all for her coming, and wanted them to walk ahead, "so's I can keep my eye on you," he explained. Evelyn made him lead. The women followed after him, arm in arm, brunting the vegetation aside.

"That man's as frisky as a ginger bull at a dairy farm," Evelyn whispered. "Do you think we should tell him we came here to get Dianne?"

"What?"

"Oh, never mind," Evelyn said.

"Huh?"

"NEVER MIND!"

"It's no trouble," Mr. Tate called back. His torch light bobbed on the path. "You're both fine figures of women," he added, as if that made all the difference. Evelyn wished he would hurry. Dark imaginings flooded in again: Dianne fleeing; a police revolver shooting; scenes from a horror movie.

"Hurry," she exhorted.

"Oh, I'll find him, don't worry. Even if it takes till Tuesday."

It didn't take that long. They found Nathan in a clearing, sitting on a large round boulder, gazing out over a midnight lake that was as flat as aluminum foil. He wore a loose blue jacket against the chill, a security guard's jacket, just like the one his father had on, and he scarcely even glanced up.

"Heard you coming for five minutes. Like a bear and two moose." He glowered at his father. "Get that light out of my eyes."

The old man sputtered.

"These ladies, fine figures of women they got a problem . . ."

"My car's heading for China," Mrs. Aird explained. Nathan stared at her hair.

"And my friend Dianne Freely is being murdered out here someplace," put in Evelyn. When he gazed at her stonily, she filled him in, talking fast. About the murder weapon being a police-type gun, about the young, dimpled cop, about the victim waking up scared of the police. Nathan listened with his head on one side. "So we got to hurry and *do something*," Evelyn concluded. "She's out here now. With *him!*"

"What'd you say his name was?"

"Marvin Unger. That young new cop. With the dimples."

"Halfway to China," Mrs. Aird moaned.

Nathan said, "A cop, eh? Parking here at the Wash. Well!"

He took the flashlight away from his father and shone it in Evelyn's face.

"Aren't you the hair magician, the lady that scalped me bald?"

"Come in tomorrow, I'll glue some back on," Evelyn said. "We got to hurry. My friend Dianne—"

Nathan slid down off the rock.

"Dad, you get back to the house." With a last lustful look at the women, the older Tate went scurrying. "And you ladies stick close. We'll see what that policeman is up to, out here at my Wash."

His tone made Evelyn uneasy. What did he mean, *his Wash?* But the important thing was to save Dianne.

"Do you have a gun with you?" she asked, just to make sure.

"I always have a gun with me," Nathan replied, the way another man might say he always has a wallet. He let his jacket swing open, showing a revolver tucked in his belt.

"Oh," Evelyn said, "that S and W."

"Say, you know your guns." Nathan almost beamed at her, then turned and strode purposefully into the trees. "You two keep close and keep quiet, you hear?"

"I hear," Evelyn said.

Nathan knew the woods. In a dozen strides they were out of the trees and entering a clearing Evelyn remembered very well from her youth. Like a camping site. A cleared area with tire tracks wandering off to close, private places, and below that, the lake, a carpet stretching away to the horizon under the stars.

They walked every trail but found nothing.

"Don't see 'em," Nathan grunted. He seemed disappointed, as if he liked nothing better than confronting a murderer.

"I can't understand it," Evelyn said. She was puzzled. "Dianne said she would be here. I thought for sure—"

"Well, she ain't," Nathan Tate snapped. "Place is deserted." He added in an undertone: "Just how I like it."

Mrs. Aird tugged at his sleeve. "Can we see about my car now, all the way to China?"

Next morning, when Dianne breezed in, Evelyn pounced.

"So," she said crossly, "out at the Wash, eh?"

Dianne stood blinking. Then she shrugged out of her sweater and hung it on a hook beside her cubicle. "I don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Evelyn planted both fists on her hips.

"You know exactly what I mean. You said you were going to the Wash last night, and you didn't, you only went and made a complete and total fool out of me." She told Dianne crossly how she and Mrs. Aird had made a special excursion to rescue her from certain death, and had come up empty.

"Dead of the night, and we lost our way, and Mrs. Aird's car fell in a hole to China, and I nearly wrecked my shoes, and Nathan Tate could of shot us with each and every one of his guns, and you weren't even there!"

Dianne's complexion turned a hot pink.

"Now just a minute. I don't remember saying, Oh, please, Evelyn, dear, come out to the Wash in the middle of the night and fall in a hole and rescue me! I didn't say that, did I?" She stalked to her cubicle and laid out her clippers and scissors with angry clatters and clunks. Then she put her head around the partition, looking angry but puzzled. "Save me from what?"

Evelyn took her by the hands and pulled her to the row of customers' chairs. Told her about the description of the gun in the *Netley Leader*, the police gun, and about what Mrs. Aird had learned from her niece. "Dianne, dear, I got to know. Was Marvin with you on the night of the killing?"

Dianne concentrated.

"No. He said he was busy. Let's see, I visited my sister . . ."

"No alibi . . ." Evelyn muttered.

Dianne jerked her hands away and plumped them into her lap.

"For Pete's sake, you got your pantyhose puckered over *that*?"

"But Dianne, this is evidence. Don't you see—"

"No, I don't see. Why don't you put Nathan Tate on your list, while you're at it. He has guns, and he *lives* out there, and he doesn't like the noise! You and Mrs. Aird could have him arrested, with evidence like that."

"Dianne, you got to see—"

Dianne stood up and began sorting her combs as if they were weapons she wanted to use.

"All I see is a woman—*two* women—who can't mind their business. A woman—*two* women—over the hill and down the far side of it, with no romance in their lives, trying to horn in on mine." She plugged her trimmer in and flourished it. "Well, I won't put up with it. You hear me? I won't. So you and your balding sidekick knock it off and go back to your Special Formula and your flower club. Or run away with Nathan Tate's father. You're a nuisance, the pair of you. So!"

She sat down hard in her chair and looked fierce.

Evelyn wanted the floor to open up and give her a hole to drop into.

"Dianne . . . dear . . . it's only that . . ."

"I'm going to the Wash tonight, *for sure*, now I know how much you *don't* want me to go there. And don't you dare come after me. Understand?"

Evelyn swallowed. Her throat felt as dry as General Schwarzkopf's battle boots. She went and sat in her own cubicle, in her own barber's chair, where she couldn't see Dianne Freely anymore, and stared into space feeling miserable.

Nathan Tate, a killer? Ridiculous!

They had to drive all the way to Selkirk in a borrowed car to get to the hospital. It was one of those huge old places with marble halls where people's shoes made noises like wood blocks whacking together.

"I got to get into that ward, into that room, so's I can have a little talk with that wounded witness. Understand?"

"What?"

"I said—"

"Into that shot girl's room?" Mrs. Aird sounded grave. "I don't know about that. It don't seem ethical. Besides, I should be doing something to get my car pulled out. That darn Nathan. Said he was busy today."

Mrs. Aird hurried at Evelyn's side, trotting out a din.

"How deep do you suppose a car could actually sink?" she wondered. There was a ghostly reverberation to her voice. "Could it be lost forever? Like one of them tar pit dinosaurs, the kind they dig up every fifty million years?"

"If somebody digs your car up in fifty million years, then it won't have been lost forever," Evelyn pointed out.

Mrs. Aird brightened. "Good grief, that's right, too, isn't it? I never thought of that." She stepped along more sprightly. She seemed considerably cheered.

"And just remember," Evelyn said, "if anybody asks, we're here to see an ailing relative."

"What kind of relative?"

"I don't know. How about an uncle? A dying uncle. I can have a dying uncle if I want to, can't I? Then later we'll make Nathan Tate pull your car out of the mud. Busy today! That man is the limit!"

"He's not that attractive," said Mrs. Aird.

They stepped into an elevator, went up, and stepped out of it. Evelyn consulted a scrap of paper from her purse, a note from Mrs. Aird's niece. "This is the floor. And that's the room. And, oh my Lord and saints come to rescue us, there's a uniformed policeman standing right outside the door."

"Your basic policeman is the citizen's friend," said Mrs. Aird as though suddenly remembering a school lesson.

"There's a policeman somewhere that's nobody's friend except the undertaker's," said Evelyn.

"A policeman will give you directions," said Mrs. Aird.

"I know that. Like, 'Ma'am, hold your head up so I can get a clear shot at it.' Evelyn had dragged Mrs. Aird to an abrupt stop. Now she jostled her by the elbow so that they could pretend to look at a poster urging caution to medicated drivers of motor vehicles.

DRIVE WITH CARE a policeman in the poster warned.

"I'll drive with care," said Mrs. Aird, "if I ever get my Chinese car again."

"Park with care, too," Evelyn muttered under her breath. "Especially at the Wash." She leaned into Mrs. Aird's ear: "You got to get me by that loogan at the door somehow. Distract him. Pretend you dropped a contact lens."

"I don't even have a contact lens."

"I know that. But he don't, does he?"

"I got two hearing aids . . ."

"They won't do. They're too big."

"They're the smallest hearing aids in the entire world, I'll have you know. President Reagan wears the exact same one . . ."

"Does he? And you and him take turns with them, right? I don't care about what President Reagan wears, *I got to get in that room!* Now, follow my cue." She suddenly braced up and shouted. "Oh, my God, it flew right out of your eye! Halp! Get it! Quick!"

She dropped to the floor and began crawling over the cold marble. Crawled right up to the policeman's black boots and stuck her hand between them. The policeman edged away. He said uneasily, "Ma'am, is there something I can do?"

"A policeman will always assist you," Mrs. Aird mumbled.

The officer took another step backward, turned his back on the room, and sank down on his haunches to peer at the floor.

"That's it, officer. See what you can do. I'll go and get help," Evelyn hollered, as if a lost contact lens were too much for them, and she started toward the nurse's station.

Two steps on, however, she made a hard right turn and slipped quickly into the crime victim's room.

There was only one bed. A furious looking woman lay in it on a hillock of pillows. She had thick black hair that stuck out at odd angles, and she held the coverlet up to her chin with brightly varnished nails. "Who the heck are you?" she demanded.

"An . . . investigator," Evelyn replied. She hadn't expected to be questioned herself.

Eyes like black buttons took her in. "You don't look like an investigator. You look like the woman from across the hall. I said I'd slap her if she tried to steal my pillows again."

"I don't want your pillows, I'm here to ask questions," Evelyn said.

"Why?"

"Because I want to find out who did this to you."

"Why?"

"So that I can catch, stop, arrest whoever did it before they attack somebody else."

Evelyn moved closer. This woman was not what she had expected. No frail, traumatized thing, but a woman her own age, energetic and combative, showing no signs at all of being struck by a killer's bullet. Did she wear bandages under the sheet?

The woman seemed to conclude that her visitor posed no threat and relaxed on her mountain of pillows.

"I don't care who you are," she said bitterly, "long as you're not a cop and you leave my pillows alone."

"You don't like cops?"

"Not when they shoot at me."

Evelyn sat on the edge of the bed.

"You mean to say a policeman shot at you?" She put just the right note of incredulity in her voice.

The woman brought a hand to her face; her fingers sparkled with rings.

"I thought so . . . but they said no, impossible. And then I thought maybe . . . but they said no, it couldn't be. And now I think . . . Hell, I don't know what to think!"

She suddenly heaved herself up and seized Evelyn by the sleeve. There was a look of desperation in her black eyes.

"You're a decent lady. You got laugh lines on your face. Listen." Her voice became a hiss. "*I'm being kept here against my will! You got to help me get away!*"

"Oh, now . . ." Evelyn tried to pull her arm away. She wasn't sure she liked this one bit.

"You got to. Then I'll answer all your questions. Tell you things I never told those awful police. Help you investigate that killer—" The woman's eyes opened wide. Her voice became a whistle. "Quick! Someone's coming! If they find you, I'll be kept a prisoner here for life! Run! Hurry! Hide!"

There might have been a torturer just outside the door. Evelyn panicked, leaped up, ran around the room, spotted the bathroom door, and dashed through it. There was nowhere to hide. She squeezed between the tub and toilet, her back to the cold tile wall. Her heart pounded. She heard voices.

Faint voices, echoing, in the hall outside the room. Mrs. Aird, the policeman—and a third voice, high and shrill . . .

The shrill voice came into the outer room, speaking to the woman on the bed. Now the bathroom door would fly open. A policeman would take Evelyn away in an unmarked car, to the Wash, and she'd never be seen again. She tried to conceal herself with the shower curtain, but her freshly-cleaned Reeboks stuck out from under it like two white flags.

The bathroom door opened. Evelyn peeked through a tiny slit in the plastic and saw a nurse holding the door ajar with her hip,

looking back towards the woman on the bed. The nurse's arms bulged with pillows.

"You most certainly do not need all these pillows, Miss Treat. You've stolen every one in the ward. Poor Mrs. Oliphant says you yanked hers right out from under her head. It's got to stop." She came right into the bathroom. "Need fresh towels? No?" She went out again. "Now behave yourself." The hall door opened and closed.

Evelyn climbed out of the bathtub. She went back out to the woman in the bed, with sweat on her brow, tottering.

"Quick," Miss Treat barked. "My clothes are in that drawer. And my purse. Hurry!"

Evelyn got them. Events had overtaken her. She watched for bandages as Miss Treat dressed but saw none. The hall door opened, stopping Evelyn's heart again, but it was only Mrs. Aird, poking her patchy gray head into the room.

"All done? The coast is clear. I sent that cop for some Murine. Told him my eyes were burning up. I lied. Let's beat it." She frowned. "Holy heck in a Hupmobile, is this the victim?"

Miss Treat had transformed herself. All dressed she looked absolutely . . . different. Patent leather shoes with heels so high she appeared to be standing on the tips of her toes. White denim jeans so tight they nearly screamed. And a tank top that barely contained her. They watched as she hooked her earrings on—huge brass pirate spangles that grazed her shoulders and jangled when she moved.

"What's wrong with your hair?" she asked Mrs. Aird. And then made for the door. "Let's boogie."

Mrs. Aird didn't ease up on the gas until the hospital was a blur in the rear view mirror. Only then could Evelyn stop hanging on for dear life and turn around and talk to Miss Treat, who was sprawled like a countess across the back seat, applying makeup. Her lips were already bright as a Day-Glo marker.

"You could use some pillows back here," she said.

"What?" Mrs. Aird yelled.

"She wants pillows!" Evelyn yelled back.

"Huh! Ask her what does she expect from a getaway car! And a kidnapping! I'll be in prison, next."

"Did you steal this car?" Miss Treat's freshly penciled eyes widened admiringly.

"Never mind. We got you out, didn't we?" Evelyn reminded her.
"Now tell us what you know."

"I know plenty."

"Good. Let's hear it. Why aren't you wounded, for starters? The paper said you were wounded."

"I am wounded. Inside my head."

"And I'll give you something on the outside of your head, if you don't get on with it," Evelyn muttered.

"What happened," Miss Treat said, "without a word of a lie, is I'm sitting there in the city, and this guy calls me up—"

"What guy?"

"How do I know what guy? Some guy. I don't know. He wants to, you know, do business." She lolled on the seat, her top straining alarmingly. "I goes, that's fine, and so he goes, how about a drive in the country, and I goes, there's an idea, I know a good spot—"

"The Wash," Evelyn said. "How'd you know about the Wash?"

Miss Treat fluttered her false eyelashes. They were so long she could have swept out the car with them. "From a previous acquaintance."

"A business acquaintance?"

"Sure! I get around, you know."

Like a pickup truck, you do, Evelyn thought, while Mrs. Aird yelled, "Business? What business? She in some kind of a business?"

"She's in the service industry!" Evelyn hollered back.

"Service industry." Miss Treat giggled. "That's good. Service industry."

"Keep going. This is life and death here. This guy, you don't know who, and yourself, you drive on out to the Wash, and then what?"

Miss Treat put her makeup away. She had a huge purse; it would qualify as luggage.

"It was busy. There were other cars around. So we drove farther in till we found our own private spot, everybody does, and we settled in." Her bright look faded. "Then came the awful part, the part I'm not so clear about. There we are, minding our own, you know, business—and suddenly this ungodly light comes blazing in on us . . ."

Mrs. Aird heard that.

"Business in the dark? She does business in the dark?"

Evelyn said, "Policemen do business in the dark." She went back to Miss Treat. "So this light comes blazing . . ."

"Blazing right in at us. Like a ray gun. Nearly blinds us, okay? It's some damn kid, I thought, being a jerk. I rolls the window down. I goes, "Get that light out of my face!" But nobody says nothing. The light flashes onto my friend. I think maybe I saw a bit of the killer, then."

"Monkey business, that's what!" Mrs. Aird yelled.

"You saw him? Actually saw him? What'd you see?"

"A uniform. Buttons gleaming. I know a uniform when I see one. Then this gun appears in my face. Right in my face. I can't believe it, I swear to God. Can't even lift my hand to shove it aside. I mean, I must of freaked. I goes, 'My God, a gun, don't shoot . . .' And then . . . BOOM!"

"Dear Lord!" Evelyn breathed, thinking about Dianne.

"BOOM!" Miss Treat repeated. "Right in my face like a bomb going off. I must of went into shock then, or something, because I don't remember nothing till I woke up in the hospital, opened my eyes, and saw those cops. In their uniforms. I screamed and screamed."

"You poor woman," Evelyn said. "No wonder they held you for observation. Before the gun went off, what else did you see?"

"Well, I've thought about that. I saw the gun. But I couldn't see his hand, the one that held the gun. It was kind of pulled up inside his sleeve, or something. Couldn't see his face, on account of the shadow. But I got a good look at his ear."

"His ear?"

"His left ear. Maybe the way his flashlight was shining. A reflection or something. He wore a cap, I saw the side of it, and I saw a bit of his ear with his hair curling over it."

"Hair?" Evelyn came alive. "Tell me about his hair. I know all about hair. I'm a hair expert. What color was it? What style?"

"I don't know. It looked gray. But everything looks gray at night." She shrugged. "There's nothing else I can say."

Evelyn sank back, glum. "Too bad. I know everybody within five miles by their hair, kids to granddads. Maybe gray, maybe not? That don't help much." She tried to remember what Dianne Freely's new boyfriend's hair was like. Not gray. And probably short. But then didn't some policemen wear their hair longer nowadays? And like Miss Treat said, there was the light. "You never told the police about this?"

"I never tell them nothing."

"You couldn't say how thick or how thin that hair was?"

Miss Treat shook her head.

Night was falling fast. Cars rushed by with their headlights on, like long, sleek policemen with flashlights in their hands. Evelyn nudged Mrs. Aird.

"Head on out to the Wash. Dianne Freely's there for sure this time, just to spite me."

An anxious look crossed Mrs. Aird's face. But she clenched the wheel harder and drove faster.

They slowed at the turnoff by the old blasted elm. Mrs. Aird shuddered at the spot where her car had gone into the mud. There was no car there now.

"Gone," Mrs. Aird said dejectedly. "Gone to China."

The woods seemed even more foreboding this time. They rolled past the Tate drive and kept going. The road became two ruts, twisting over sandy ground, then finally broke out at the Wash. Evelyn scanned the thickets for the gleam of a parked car and saw nothing.

Miss Treat was irate.

"You never told me you were bringing me back to this awful place."

"You said you liked the Wash."

"Not with a killer ready to take another crack at me. I'd rather be at the hospital, with no pillows."

"Shut up," said Evelyn, "or you will be."

They caught a glimpse of the lake, a carpet of twinkling water. There were beaches along the far side—Patricia Beach, Grand Beach, Victoria Beach—the killer could be at any one of them. Perhaps some romantic couple out there was gazing back across the water at Ponemah—or getting murdered. Evelyn shuddered.

Evelyn leaned into Mrs. Aird's ear. "Stop the car. I'm going to look for Dianne on foot."

"Not without me," Mrs. Aird announced.

"And not without me," echoed Miss Treat. "Don't think you're leaving me behind to get murdered and killed."

Mrs. Aird parked on a piece of solid ground where the car could not sink to China or anywhere else.

Timidly they looked around. The place was unnervingly deserted. They walked carefully, trying to peer in every direction at once. Perhaps Mrs. Aird's eyes were sharpened by her hearing loss, for she was first to see the back of the small car poking out of a

copse on a bluff overlooking the water, and she gripped Evelyn's arm.

"That it?" *

Evelyn sucked in her breath. Thank God for Mrs. Aird. It was Dianne's car, all right. She felt relief, and then a flood of cold apprehension.

"So what do we do?" asked Mrs. Aird.

"Let me think." It was a ticklish situation. You didn't want to rush in where no angel would tread. On the other hand, it might mean life or death. She peered at the car. The doors were closed, the windows steamed up. She took a breath, then strode up and pummelled hard on the roof.

"DIANNE, YOU IN THERE?"

A muffled cry. The car lurched, then trembled with frenzied, hidden action. A door swung open. Dianne Freely's head popped out as if it were at the end of a coil spring, and her nostrils blew dragon's plumes in the chill air.

"Evelyn! You! I told you not to follow me! I said for you to leave me alone! And here you are, you—"

"You listen to me, that murderer's still on the loose," Evelyn told her, "and what's worse, I'm darn sure he's sitting in there right beside you!"

"Evelyn, I told you—"

"Hold on a minute." Marvin Unger, the young policeman, put his dimpled face out into the night beside Dianne's. Evelyn flinched, waiting to be shot. "What's this about a murderer?"

Dianne said, "She thinks you're it—I mean, *him*. I mean, she thinks you're the killer."

"Me?" He blinked. Opened his mouth and then closed it again. There was no revolver in his hands. "What the devil makes you think that?"

"The facts," Evelyn said. "Only the facts, and nothing but the facts." She glared at him as if she could sweep him into the lake with her eyes. "Facts I spent two days collecting. Facts that point at you, straight at you, only at y—"

"But it's not him," Miss Treat said blankly.

"Who's this?" Dianne's eyebrows arched as she took in Miss Treat, who was wobbling in her five inch heels on the uneven ground, looking as if she might burst out of her clothes at any minute.

"It's got to be him," Evelyn insisted. "He's a policeman. He's got

a uniform at home. He's got no alibi for the night of the killings, and just look at *that*—his hair *does* curl over his ears."

"Hmm. Yes," agreed Miss Treat. "But thing is, his ears are too small."

"Too small?" Evelyn was getting mad. "How the heck do you know they're too small? Did you measure them?"

"Who *is* this?" Dianne wanted to know.

"This is Miss Treat. She takes care of business. Does it in the dark," Mrs. Aird explained to the others, with a frown of disapproval on her face.

"Hi," Miss Treat said. She stooped to take hold of the half-open door, giving her top a workout. A couple of things happened then, both at the same instant: one of her heels snapped and she fell, and something, very loud, went boom. A gun, Evelyn thought, too surprised to do anything about it. The shot had been loud. And very close. It still echoed in the shadows, rolling out towards the lovers on the far side of the lake. Evelyn closed her eyes and opened them and saw that a large round hole had appeared in the safety-glass window of the door Miss Treat had been reaching for when the shot went off and her shoe broke.

"I HEARD THAT!" Mrs. Aird yelled.

"Everybody down!" Marvin said, bounding from the car. A dozen yards away, the crackle of twigs and branches, the pelt of retreating footsteps. Not hesitating, Marvin dashed in pursuit.

Mrs. Aird helped Miss Treat up, brushing pine needles off the white denim seat of her jeans for her.

"Almost killed," Miss Treat moaned. "Again."

"These things take time," Mrs. Aird assured her.

Dianne was struggling out of the car. "Marvin!" she hollered. "Don't let anybody shoot my Marvin!" She rushed after the young policeman.

Then they were all scrambling after Marvin. It seemed like the thing to do. They fought their way into the brush and lost their direction instantly. Evelyn knew right away she had no idea which heading to take, and she was beginning to wonder if they were all lost for good when Marvin called out of the dark in a gruff voice.

"Gave me the slip. Must know these woods pretty well."

He strode angrily out of the trees.

"Let's keep looking." Evelyn had a real good mad on now.

"Bad idea. Whoever it was, their aim may improve. Best to head back to town. I'll make a report."

"Or maybe," said Evelyn, her mind busily thinking about police uniforms, and clothes that *looked* like police uniforms, "maybe pay a visit to the Tates—Junior and Senior?"

"Well . . ."

"No wells. I'm on the scent here. Following a trail. A bloodhound five sniffs from the truth. Don't hold me back."

Nathan Tate warily greeted them and let them into the house. When he saw the five of them standing in his living room grim as a posse, he seemed to be having second thoughts, frowning and running a hand over his nicked scalp.

Miss Treat eyed the heap of pillows on his couch.

"Let me guess," Nathan said; "you lost another car in the mud, and these folks stopped to help, and they got stuck too, and now you want me to haul you both onto solid ground again. Am I warm?"

"Not even room temperature," Evelyn told him, watching closely for an attitude, and telling him what had just occurred out at the Wash.

"Somebody shot at you?" He looked passably surprised. It might have been an act, but if so it was a good one.

"That's right," Evelyn said, "somebody shot at us and almost struck this poor woman dead." She dragged Miss Treat forward. "Ever see this lady before?"

Nathan Tate growled. "No, I haven't."

"She's the same lady almost got shot the other night, does that help?"

"I don't know her."

Evelyn leaned closer.

"Been up to the hospital lately?"

"I don't have to tell you nothing."

"No? Maybe you want to reconsider that. We could show your picture around the nursing stations, you know."

Nathan Tate again ran his hands over his close-cropped hair. "All right. So I took my dad there today so he could visit someone. So what."

"Visit who?"

"I don't know. He's getting on. People he knows are always winding up there. He went up by himself. I waited downstairs for him."

"Or maybe he waited downstairs for you."

Nathan Tate's hackles went up.

"I told you—"

Evelyn sized him up with a narrow look. "The police had a guard on that room. Smart. Only natural, isn't it, the killer would go there to try and shut up this lady. She's the only witness to the killing. Maybe that killer would like to see her moved to another room. A basement room. Air-conditioned. Fridge doors in a row."

Marvin broke in. "What about you, Miss Treat? Have you seen this man before?"

"You're the police, I don't tell you nothing," Miss Treat said with pride. Evelyn reached out and shook her. The tube top heaved like it had hot water bottles under it.

"Don't you understand what we're dealing with here? There's one person dead, and you've been almost killed twice yourself, so don't you think you should stop being cute and cooperate? Honestly now, do you know this man or don't you?"

Miss Treat wilted under Evelyn's attack. She lowered her eyes and looked up again.

"No," she said finally. "No, I honestly don't . . ."

Evelyn thought, well, that ends it, and a bit of the tension seemed to go out of the room. Then Miss Treat gave a start.

"But I do know that man over there!" she blurted out suddenly, rocking them all. And she pointed to Tate's father, who had appeared at the gun room door looking eager, having heard the female voices, but was now reeling back as if someone had struck him a blow.

"Hello there, Mr. Smith!" Miss Treat called out loudly.

"Smith?" They all said it at once.

Miss Treat stared at Tate Senior, then burst out crying. She dabbed at her eyes, and her heavy eyeliner smudged instantly, giving her two whopping shiners.

"Mr. Smith. Yes. It's what I call him. He got my phone number out of the personals column, and we met. Then he'd phone me, and I'd drive up from town, meet him at that old elm, and we'd park at the Wash. A beautiful spot," she added, as if that explained everything. "So peaceful—"

"This is fantastic." Nathan Tate strode across the room and back again, gripping his head. "I don't believe a word of it. My dad? Out there? With *her*? It's ridiculous! He's old enough to be her father. And besides, him and me don't approve of what goes on out there."

He fixed his eyes in turn on every face in the room, wound up staring at Marvin, who was fingering one of Nathan's security

guard jackets. Marvin said, "I think this is starting to make some sense. I think maybe you found out about Miss Treat and your dad. It made you mad. You went out that night, thinking the two of them were together, to put a stop to it. Then you saw it wasn't your dad in the car for a change. It was some other man. And the truth hit you hard between the eyes. Made you madder. You realized it wasn't just some Miss Lonely Heart your dad had been seeing, but a—"

"Lies! All lies!" Nathan Tate rubbed his head.

"I'm a businesswoman," Miss Treat said.

"You blew up. Lost control. You had a gun with you as usual, and before you knew it, you . . ."

"Marvin, slow down. Just hang on a minute," Evelyn said. "Everybody take it easy for a sec." She patted Miss Treat's arm. "Relax, dear, don't be afraid, and tell Mr. Unger here exactly what you told us in the car—about the killer's hair."

"It was longish . . . curling over his ear . . ."

"You sure of that?"

"Yes."

"Right. Now, Marvin, just you look at Nathan's hair."

"I'm looking. It's short. So what. Maybe he cut it."

"No, I cut Nathan's hair. Just a day or two after the shooting, too, and it wasn't curling over his ear then either. He never lets it get that long. Wears it short. Always has." She turned to Miss Treat again. "Now tell him about the killer's hand."

Miss Treat looked puzzled.

"I told you I couldn't see his hand. It was pulled up inside his sleeve."

"That's right. Pulled up inside. Or else the sleeve was too long for the arm." She glanced up. "So who do we know has short arms and hair curling over their ears?"

Silence. They all looked at one another. Then at the old man. The old man looked defiant, then shuffled forward, trying not to look at his son's florid face. He addressed himself to Miss Treat.

"When you wouldn't meet me no more, I started noticing you in cars that drove on by the house." Pain and outrage constricted his voice. "Seen you lots of times. Seen you in the night in a fancy car rolling down to the Wash, lights blazing like you wanted me to know about it. You knew I wouldn't give you up—I told you that." A look of anguish came over his face. "Nathan was sleeping. I took me a gun—"

"Nathan's gun," Evelyn said.

"Pulled on a jacket—"

"Nathan's jacket."

"They were handy, that's all. And I walked down the road to the Wash." He shrugged. "I found the car, went up to it, and—"

He broke off, shrugging his bony shoulders.

"Go on," Evelyn prompted.

The old man spun about and said fiercely:

"I only meant to give 'em a scare. But then when I seen who she was with instead of me—a really *old* man—with *no hair at all . . .*" He proudly fingered his bushy fringe. "I dunno what come over me. I guess I just kind of got peeved."

Miss Treat's eyes flew open.

"Peeved? You got peeved? I'll give you peeved!" Shrieking, she tried to climb over Marvin to get at the old man. "If we all got peeved the way you get peeved, there'd be bullets and bodies from here to next Tuesday! *Peeved!*"

Evelyn was silently nodding her head. She said to Miss Treat, "So the victim was one of your customers. A stranger, I imagine. I wondered why you didn't seem too broken up about him when I seen you today at the hospital."

Miss Treat mopped her eyes. "They asked me did I know him, and I said no. That was true, wasn't it? I did *not* know him. I mean, his name. They don't usually tell me their names . . ."

"All I know is there'd of been another one just like him a week later," the old man suddenly roared. "Only older. And one after him. Soon as I was out of money, you dropped me like a hot rock!"

"I got to make a living, don't I?" Miss Treat flung back. "It was business with me. I never said it wasn't."

"Maybe. But you don't have to come traipsing out here, either, right past my nose every time! You didn't have to bring *bald* men. You wanted me to squirm. You *enjoyed* it!"

Miss Treat's face contorted. It seemed she might leap at the old man again. Marvin Unger stepped between them quickly. Then he stiffened. He held out his hands. They all looked to see what he was staring at. It was Nathan. He had taken his father's place at the door of the gun room, during all the shouting, and now he held the Smith and Wesson in his hand.

Mrs. Aird made a moaning sound.

The electric clock on the wall ground away noisily.

All they could do was wait. The man with the gun makes the

rules. Then, after what seemed an eternity, Nathan Tate slowly brought the revolver up till it was leveled at them—raised it farther, put it to his nose, and sniffed curiously at the barrel end.

"I'll be damned. This gun *has* been fired tonight," he said. He turned angry eyes accusingly on the old man. Then he dropped the gun on the floor.

Evelyn's legs were trembling; she had to sit down quickly in a chair. Marvin Unger picked up the gun, positioned himself in the gun room door to guard it, made both Tates sit on the sofa where he could watch them, and sent Dianne to the kitchen to telephone the police. Mrs. Aird plumped herself down next to Evelyn.

"Well," she said, "are we going to sit around this place all night, or are we going to go out there and haul my damn car out?"

So Big Al went out on his own and pulled your car out for you, that's something, at least." They were back safe and sound at the Easy-Clip, Mrs. Aird in Evelyn's chair, Dianne doing a blue dye job for a Dunnotar schoolteacher, other side of the wall. Evelyn said, "And imagine that Miss Treat, saying she'd wait the rest of her life by the prison wall for old Tate to join her, that she never knew anybody so true in her whole life."

"Make more sense for her to join him if you ask me," replied Mrs. Aird, "at his age. And a killer, too. If that's love, they can have it."

Evelyn combed out a lock of Mrs. Aird's hair, and a thin, wispy mat of it came away in her hand. "Rats," she said, "it's still falling. Like a sort of gray rain. You sure you been using Special Formula just like I told you?"

"Of course I have. I'm desperate. Think I want to go around like an Elmer Fudd? Some sort of a Telly Savalas?" Mrs. Aird was not happy. "Yes, I got my car back again, and you're right, that's one thing, but my hair, that's something else. You promised you'd help me take care of it."

"I am helping you. I been thinking a lot about it. Like maybe it's something you picked up from someplace, like a dentist's office. X-rays, maybe. Flying after you? Hitting you in the head? Radiation?"

Dianne Freely's voice sang out from behind the partition: "X-rays? Can't be X-rays. I learned that in high school. Has to

be some kind of fission, or something. Is your dentist using some kind of fission?"

"What's fishing got to do with it?" Mrs. Aird snapped. "I'm beginning to think it's more likely something I got right here, something I've been spooning onto my own head, more fool me. That damn Special Formula."

"What?" said Dianne. "Not that. Do you think we want to create a baldheaded town? That wouldn't help our line of business, would it?"

"Now you're worrying about business. About time, too. And maybe spend less time chasing after murderers." Mrs. Aird watched Evelyn closely in the mirror, and then said, "So maybe I missed something—why *did* old Tate kill that man out there at the Wash, anyway?"

"Good grief," said Evelyn. "You still don't get it?"

"Wet it? Course I wet it. And rub it in just like you said. Now, why did that man have to die?"

Evelyn heaved a great sigh and ladled on more Special Formula. "Guess I can honestly say that man had to die," she said clearly into Mrs. Aird's left ear, "because he got on somebody's nerves, and because he'd lost the last of his hair."

And she tugged out a very large patch of Mrs. Aird's thinning grav mop.

Mute Robbery

by Patrick O'Keeffe

Mike Hagen, finally wakened by the persistent ringing, reached out to the bedside table for the telephone. "Hagen," he mumbled sleepily.

"Boss, this is Gussman at the pier. Stickup aboard the ship. Guy with a knife made the purser open his safe. Got away with a hundred grand, the third mate said. He called the cops."

"Guss, tell Cap'n Svensen I'm on my way over."

"He ain't aboard yet, boss. The third mate phoned him. The second mate's in charge right now."

Dropping the handset back to the cradle, Hagen switched on the bedside light and tumbled out.

His niece knocked on the door. "What was it, Uncle?"

"Robbery aboard the *Bornvale*."

"I'll make coffee."

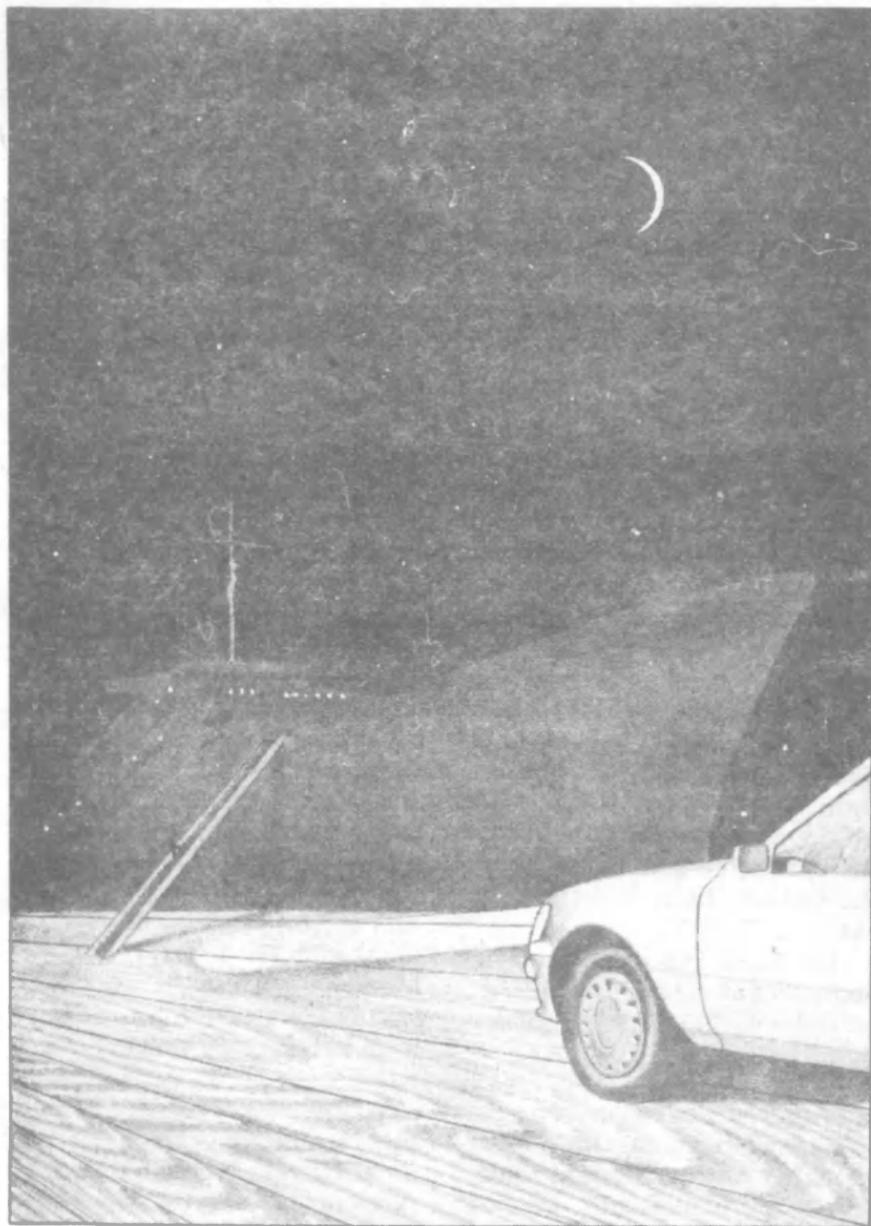
"Peggy, I can't stop for it."

Hagen, hefty and fifty, with speckled hair and square jaw, threw on his clothes, dashed the residual sleep from his eyes with a hasty cold-water rinse in

the bathroom, and rushed out into the warm spring air to the garage. Hovering close to the speed limit toward the George Washington Bridge in the light traffic, Hagen reviewed his security arrangements for the transfer of the canvas sack containing the hundred thousand dollars to the *Bornvale*, another of the occasional shipments of American currency to a La Plata bank associated with the Bornholz Lines' wide interests in Latin America. One of his men had escorted the cashier's department's man from the West Side office building to the downtown pier, using the company limousine, and had obtained a receipt after seeing the sack locked in the purser's safe. The driver, too, was one of his men, and he could vouch for him and the escort. This was the first time a shipment had been heisted, or even subjected to an attempt.

When Hagen arrived at the pier entrance and deserted West Street, only a single unmarked police car was outside. The headlights suddenly blazed up as two men hunched into the

MUTE ROBBERY



"CHIEF OF SECURITY." HAGEN ANNOUNCED.

front seats. Braking alongside, Hagen slid out, recognizing Baron of the local precinct detective squad, whom he'd known before resigning from the police department to become chief of security for the Bornholt Lines.

"Mike," Baron called out, "go back and hit the hay again. A clean getaway in a motorboat. And, Mike, it's sure one for the book—the heister was a deaf-mute. Next thing, it'll be a blind man with a dog."

"A deaf-mute!" Hagen echoed, incredulous.

"He wasn't dumb, though. He kept the paper he'd written his instructions on, so nothing for the lab. No prints, either; he wore mittens. The hundred grand makes it a robbery squad case, so the boys will be along later."

As Baron drove off, Hagen headed for the tall pier gates and banged on the little door set in them.

Gussman opened it. "Boss," the gateman said anxiously, "the cops gimme a good goin' over. I told 'em I didn't let anybody down to the ship except crew members, an' I took a good look at their passes, like I always do." Gussman jerked his thumb toward the uniformed customs guard standing at the door of the little office. "He'll back me up."

As the guard nodded, Hagen said, "Okay, Guss. The cops are satisfied the heist was pulled off from a motorboat."

Striding down the dimly lit pier with its depression-reduced accumulated general cargo awaiting the next ship, Hagen reflected that it must have been a hurriedly planned job; it wasn't known until yesterday afternoon that the money would be shipped. Aboard the *Bornvale*, only the captain and the purser had been told of it so far, though the other officers would doubtless learn about it after the ship had sailed, in the course of general conversation among them. Someone in the cashier's department could have leaked word to a waterfront mob. He might yet recover the money.

Hagen bounded up the freighter's gangway. A sailor lounging on a workbench, a transistor radio beside him, rose and challenged him with a look.

"Chief of Security," Hagen announced.

"The second mate's waitin' for you up in the chartroom, sir." The sailor pointed toward the three-deck bridge superstructure.

At the top of the three flights of steps, Hagen sniffed in the aroma of percolating coffee as he passed through the adjourn-

ing wheelhouse to the chart-room. The second mate looked around from the chart table. He was spare and dark, approaching thirty, a worried expression on his lean face. He wore officer's blue trousers and white shirt, minus black necktie.

"Harper," he said dolefully, extending his hand. "The gate-man told me to expect you, Mr. Hagen. Maybe you'd like a cup of coffee."

"Mr. Harper, tell me what happened first."

"Well, I was in here making chart changes," Harper began in an unhappy tone, "when Mr. Finley, the purser, came running up in his pajamas and said he'd just been wakened by a man with a knife and made to give him a sack with a hundred thousand dollars in it from the safe. He was so scared he could hardly talk."

"What time was it?"

"Around one o'clock."

"What action did you take?"

"I ran down and shook the third mate. He's single like me and sleeps on board in port. The ship's phone had been disconnected because of the six A.M. sailing, so I sent him up to the phone at the gate to call the police. Also to phone the captain and the chief mate at their homes. They're on their way down. I'm expecting Cap'n

Svensen any minute now."

"Where were you during the robbery?"

"Right here." The second mate gestured at a chart spread out on the table, a batch of printed notices on it. "Every time we come back from a voyage we get lists of changes to be made in charts and sailing instructions. It's my job as navigation officer to mark them up. So I took advantage of this port watch to catch up. I've been at it since coming on duty at midnight. It helped me to stay awake. I was ashore till midnight, so I didn't get any sleep."

"One of the detectives outside the gates told me the getaway was made by motorboat."

"I heard it race away." Harper glanced at an open porthole on the offshore side as the siren of a craft out in the river sounded a long blast. "I thought at first it might be a police launch coming alongside to inquire about something, so I went out to the wing of the bridge. I was just in time to see a motorboat rounding the end of the next pier and heading up the river. I couldn't make out anyone in it in the dark."

"At least you saw the direction it took. You didn't hear it come alongside?"

"No. It must have coasted up. I wish I had heard it coming alongside," the second mate

added disconsolately. "This had to happen to me, during my watch and while I was in full charge of the ship. Someone'll have to be the fall guy, and who else but me?"

"Is the purser still up?"

"He went back to his room after the detectives had finished with him. I doubt if he's asleep yet. He's pretty well shook up. The robber threatened to kill him with the knife."

The purser's room and adjoining office were two decks down in the bridge superstructure. Hagen knocked lightly on the purser's door and entered in response to a feeble "Come in." The purser lay in the bunk beneath the two open portholes, with the reading lamp on. He sat up as Hagen closed the door. Finley was stoutish and middle-aged, with a florid, pudgy face and fleshy jowls.

Hagen moved up beside the bunk. "Mr. Finley, I'd like to get particulars about the holdup firsthand from you."

The purser drew in a deep breath, as if to fortify himself against reliving his experience. "I thought for sure he was going to kill me."

"How did it begin?"

"Why, all of a sudden—when my lights went on and woke me up. I thought at first the ship was at sea and I was being

called out for something. Then I saw a man standing over there by the door. It was shut, and he had his back to it, not like a man who'd opened it to call me. He had on a knitted woolen helmet—you know, the kind mates and sailors wear on the bridge in freezing weather—which covered his face except for his eyes and mouth. He had knitted mittens on, too, and a knife in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other. He came over to me without speaking a word, and I knew why when he thrust the paper at me to read."

The purser gestured with a trembling hand at a pair of hornrimmed reading glasses. "I put them on, but I didn't need to. The writing was in plain block letters, in pencil. It said I was to open the safe and give him the sack of bank money. After that, I was to stay in my office for another ten minutes if I wanted to stay alive. It said he was a deaf-mute, but if I shouted or made any sound to attract attention, he had a way of knowing it and would kill me."

The purser gulped. "He pressed the point of the knife against my neck and made a queer sound in his throat—you know, like some mutes do, as though he was trying to impress on me what would hap-

pen if I didn't follow his instructions."

"What kind of knife was it?"

"A sheath knife, like sailors sometimes wear working around the decks. He wore a blue denim shirt and jeans, all looking brand-new. Like I told the cops, if he hadn't been deaf and mute, I'd have figured he was a sailor from some other ship, or from a towboat maybe, because of his clothes and knitted stuff, along with the knife."

"Was he tall or short, heavy-set?"

"Around medium height, I'd say, and on the lean side. With his head covered, I couldn't tell if he was dark or fair. I was too scared anyway to take much notice. When I went into my office to open the safe, my hands were shaking so bad I couldn't get the combination right. Twice I missed it. The guy acted as though I was stalling—pushed my head back and drew the knife across my throat to show he meant what he'd said. I was lucky enough to hit the combination on the third try. By that time, I was dripping sweat, scared I'd forget the numbers, let alone not be able to set them."

The purser shivered. "The guy grabbed the sack even as I was lifting it out. Then he held up both hands with the fingers spread out, all ten of them, to

warn me to stay put for ten minutes. I let a good ten go by before I figured he'd left the ship, then ran up and told the second mate."

"The deaf-mute took the sheet of paper with him?"

"Grabbed it back after I'd read it and stuck it into his pocket."

"Hiding his face seems to indicate he was known to you, and he printed his instructions to conceal his handwriting. Are you acquainted with a deaf-mute?"

The purser gave his head an emphatic shake. "Not a single one."

"He was someone who was familiar with the layout of the ship, the location of your room and office, or else he was directed to them by someone on board." Hagen walked over to the office doorway. Reaching inside, he snapped on the light switch, revealing the tall safe in the far corner, opposite the passageway door and the little shuttered window through which the purser conducted ship's business. A desk and a table were littered with crew lists, discharge slips, and forms, one still in a typewriter. Lying beside the machine was the blue tissue duplicate receipt for the bank-money sack.

"The place is in a bit of a mess," the purser said apolo-

getically from the bunk. "I got behind in my work yesterday afternoon. My wife stayed at a hotel while the ship was in port, and I'd arranged to have dinner with her before she left for the airport to catch a plane back home. I was delayed through having to wait for the bank money to come aboard. Right after I'd checked it into the safe, the second mate came in and told me my wife was on the phone, wanting to know if I'd left the ship yet. I went out and told her I was on my way, then dropped everything and rushed ashore. I came back around ten thirty, dog-tired, and turned in."

Hagen switched off the lights. "I presume you didn't mention over the phone why you'd been delayed."

"I most certainly did not," the purser snorted. "Not even at the hotel."

"As the robber's instructions specifically mentioned the bank money, it's plain he knew of it, and either came by the knowledge legitimately or it had been leaked to him. Also, the job called for swift planning, with a motorboat available, a man who knew the layout of the ship, even a deaf-mute if none other was to be had at short notice, with perhaps an accomplice on board." Hagen paused. "What do you

know about the sailor on gangway watch?"

"Not much. He's a new man. joined the ship a couple of days ago. Sturgis is his name. The detectives got nothing helpful from him, the second mate told me."

"I might be luckier."

Hagen went down another deck to the gangway. The sailor was seated on the bench, listening to the muted radio, his attention at the moment directed beyond the stern at the lights of a ship steaming up the river. He looked around at the sound of Hagen's approach and rose. Sturgis was a husky young man in his twenties, with longish brown hair and beard, his khaki work shirt tucked loosely inside patched jeans.

"Where were you during the robbery?" Hagen asked.

"Right here, sir, listenin' to my radio." Sturgis gestured at the transistor radio.

"Then you heard the motorboat race away."

The sailor nodded. "I went across the deck to the other side. It was just goin' around the end o' the pier, headin' down river. I didn't know it was a getaway boat till the second mate came runnin' down, all excited, sayin' there'd been a holdup from a motorboat alongside."

"The robber must have had someone help him climb aboard—put a line or a ladder over the side. Did you hear or see anything suspicious around that time?"

"That's what the cops asked, too," Sturgis replied resentfully. "Like they was tryin' to make out I helped the stickup guy. It coulda been one o' the crew sneakin' up from below, on the other side, makin' no noise. Like I told the cops, I didn't have nothin' to do with the holdup."

"You're new to the ship."

"Sure. I've been out of a ship for months an' was glad to get this one. Only it turned out she's to lay up when she comes back from the next voyage," the sailor added sourly.

Hagen pondered for a moment or two, and then returned to the chartroom. Harper was still making changes on the chart. He looked around at Hagen with the same worried expression.

"I'm ready now for that cup of coffee, if the offer still holds good," Hagen said.

"Sure thing. I'll keep you company."

Hagen followed the second mate into the wheelhouse. Harper set out a fresh cup for Hagen beside his own on the locker and poured from the percolator, black for Hagen.

"Did you find the purser awake?" Harper queried.

"Yes, and got his account of the holdup. I also talked with Sturgis, the sailor on gangway watch. He told me the ship is to lay up at the end of the forthcoming voyage."

"That's so," Harper said dolefully. "Word came through late yesterday afternoon. Two sister ships, too. The depression's catching up with the Bornholt Lines." He sighed. "That's the least of my worries right now. I hope you found out enough to recover the money and help to make me less of a fall guy."

Hagen sipped his coffee. "I got a line on what appears to have taken place, or what may not have taken place. From past experience, it naturally occurred to me that the purser may have faked the robbery—conspired with someone to come alongside in a motor-boat around one o'clock, then dropped the sack into it and rushed up to you with the holdup story."

"You think that's what happened?" Harper asked eagerly.

"Finley's state of shock appears to be genuine."

"Perhaps he's a good actor."

"But why would he make up so bizarre and hardly credible a story by posing a deaf-mute as the robber?"

"Perhaps for that very rea-

son, to make it seem unlikely he'd have made up the story."

"Again, why would he have the deaf-mute warn him not to leave his office until ten minutes had gone by, when it would have taken only two or three at the most to reach the rails and the motorboat?"

Harper shrugged.

"Perhaps Mr. Finley slipped up there," he said.

"If we assume that the robbery occurred as the purser described it, then the robber must have had someone help him up the ship's side from the motorboat, perhaps also to signal the motorboat when it would be safe to sneak up alongside. My thought turned to Sturgis, the man on gangway watch."

"Of course. He's a new crew member. He may be a partner in the holdup, or else was bribed to tip off the motorboat to come alongside."

"He joined the ship two days ago, before it became known that the bank money would be put aboard, so he couldn't have been planted for the robbery. However, he could have been approached yesterday afternoon and bribed. Also, he could have supplied the robber with mask, mittens, and sheath knife."

"That could be why he needed the ten minutes, to give him plenty of time to give them

back to Sturgis," Harper suggested eagerly.

"Even that wouldn't have required ten minutes. When I questioned Sturgis about the motorboat, he said it turned down river. Either he was really mistaken, or else it was a deliberate attempt to mislead any efforts to trace the motorboat. If not the latter, then why was he mistaken? I've got a feeling that the answer to that could clear up the robbery. Maybe I'll have figured it out by the time Captain Svensen gets aboard."

"Am I rooting for you!" the second mate sighed.

When Hagen had finished his coffee, he strolled out to the bridge rails and breathed in the warm salty breeze from the sea. Gazing absently at the darkened freighter lying across the slip at the next pier, he fed information and speculations about the robbery in computer style into his mind. Suddenly, after several moments, it yielded up a logical answer to one of his questions. As if crying "Eureka!" a tugboat out in the river sounded a toot on her steam whistle.

Hagen hurried down to the purser again. Finley was still awake, but with the lights out. He switched on the bunk lamp as Hagen entered and closed the door. "Mr. Finley, you

waited a good ten minutes after the robber left before you ran up to the second mate. Why ten minutes? You'd have known he'd left the ship when you heard the motorboat roar away."

"That would have told me how he got aboard, too, which I didn't know at the time. Even then I wouldn't have taken any chances. Anyway, I didn't hear the motorboat. Maybe it was because I was shut up in here, or else I was so scared about all I could hear was my heart thumping."

Hagen threw a skeptical glance at the two open portholes, both on the same side as the one in the chartroom, and one deck lower. "Mr. Finley," he remarked enigmatically, turning back to the door, "if what I'm beginning to suspect is true, it was too bad you didn't stop to tidy up your office yesterday afternoon."

Hagen headed straight down to the gangway. "Sturgis," he began without preliminary as the sailor stood up, "you told me the motorboat headed down river. The second mate said it turned up river. Did you actually see the motorboat, or were you lying? Obstructing justice?"

The sailor looked at him hesitantly, his face showing fright from Hagen's sharp manner. "I

didn't mean it that way, sir. I only wanted to make it look like I heard the motorboat, so it wouldn't look like I was away from the job when the stickup was pulled."

"Then you *didn't* hear the motorboat, although you were across the deck from it?"

The sailor nodded unhappily. "I know it sounds kinda funny, but that's how it was. I didn't have my radio turned up loud enough to drown it out, neither. I swear I didn't leave the gangway until just after the stickup. The second mate told me when I came on watch at midnight not to leave the gangway without his permission. After the stickup, he let me go down to the messroom for coffee and sandwiches."

Hagen stood pensive for several moments, then abruptly turned and climbed the three sets of ladders back to the chartroom.

The second mate laid down his pen and regarded him with a hopeful expression. "Any luck?"

"Call it progress. I got to wondering why the purser didn't think it safe to leave his office after he heard the motorboat roar away. Perhaps there wasn't a motorboat. The purser seemed to confirm this suspicion when I questioned him again and was told he didn't

hear a motorboat. Then I scared the gangway man into admitting he lied about hearing one.

"From then on, the reasoning was downhill. If the purser's holdup story was true and there was no motorboat, what about his deaf-mute? He could be someone who saw the duplicate of the bank-money receipt in the purser's office yesterday afternoon, and then went ashore and bought a blue denim shirt and jeans to wear during the heist, along with his woolen helmet, mittens, and sheath knife. He needed ten minutes' leeway to rush to his room with the sack and change back into the clothes the purser would expect to find him wearing when he ran up with the holdup report. To guard against Sturgis's chancing to wander into the purser's area and perhaps see him, Sturgis was warned not to leave the gangway."

Even the river seemed to fall as deathly silent as the chartroom. Harper stood rigid, his eyes fixed downward on the white chart as if benumbed, his face a bleak gray. Swallowing hard, he finally spoke with bitterness. "Ship due to lay up, depression getting worse, it was worth a try. So simple—grab the money, dump the empty sack and work clothing overboard at sea, stow the green stuff in a safe deposit box at the end of the voyage—"

Harper broke off in self-disgust. "I was really being dumb, thinking I'd get away with it. What put you onto me?"

"Ironically, the fact that you're not a deaf-mute."

"I don't get it."

"To forestall a search, it had to appear that the money was taken ashore. You were the only man to hear the nonexistent motorboat."

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